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ERNEST PÉROCHON

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Translated from the French of

ERNEST PÉROCHON

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UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA



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PART I

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

THE air was alive and young; the earth steamed. Behind the plough a thousand little vapours rose, individual, separate, feathery; they seemed to be trying to rise high above the earth, as if glad to escape from the weight of the clods. Then they floated down again and settled at last, like drowsy plumes. The slanting breath of the oxen kept ahead of the team and, rising, covered the six animals with a whiter vapour, through which danced whirls of flies.

Wag-tails were fluttering from furrow to furrow; those nearest looking like fussy, coquettish little ladies, the others being nothing more than drifting flakes of mist. You could hardly make them out singly, but you were aware of great crowds of them, all busily hunting for the slow-moving, awkward grubs, bewildered at being turned up to the light of day. At the upper end of the field a magpie stood

N Ê N E

ERNEST PÉROCHON

moment, smiling at the work done, and their eyes caressed the six shiny, well muscled backs and the new plough lying flat on the earth, like a strong, lean bird.

Then Corbier lifted his head and asked,

"What news?"

"Nothing you don't know. I just took my sister to your house. You hired her from to-day, didn't you? You don't mean to say you'd forgotten?"

"Not at all! Only, I wasn't thinking of you in that connection. It wasn't you I hired; your hands are a bit large for a servant girl's."

The big fellow broke into a slow laugh that showed his white teeth; and the farmer went on:

"You aren't—maybe—stretching out Sunday a little, Trooper?"

The laugh was cut short.

"I'm not one of your town boys. A bit of a spree doesn't drive me to bed, nor upset my work days. And don't you forget it, Corbier!"

"No offence, I hope——"

"Oh, not much—I usually work on Monday. But to-day is my day off. I kept out four days in the year like that, for my mother, in my bargain with the boss. One when it's getting on to winter, to 'tend to the firewood; two for the garden; and the fourth for things unforeseen—odd jobs, as you might say."

"I know," said Corbier.

The other, once started, ran on.

"This morning, I've been digging since dawn. I wasn't playing at it, either—though the soil was easy. I've spaded the whole patch and spaded it deep. There won't be much weeding needed, after me."

Corbier nodded approval and the big fellow continued:

"It was like this. Madeleine came out to where I was in the garden patch and said, 'You come and help me,' so I carried her bundles for her and took her along the road within sight of the Moulinettes. Then I came back by the short cut, because I don't like folks to see me on the highways on working days."

"Right!" said Corbier.

"It was just to please her that I went along with her. Madeleine didn't really need me to help her. I don't want to boast about her, Corbier, but speaking of a woman's strength, there aren't many stronger than her in these parts. Now I'm off.—You've got a fine piece of land there!—Good-bye!"

As the man disappeared, Corbier righted his plough and started on a new furrow. But he was unable to keep his thoughts on his animals and his work. Instead, they now strayed toward things disturbing and sad. This meeting had stirred him as his plough stirred the soil. A mist settled over his heart, a heavy mist through which the sun did not

shine and where no birds fluttered. Not that there had ever been between him and that big fellow whom he had called Trooper anything but the ordinary exchange of good will; and as for this Madeleine who was to be his servant now, he hardly knew her.

No, these people had nothing to do with his sorrow; but they brought home to him the burden he had to bear.

A widower at thirty, he found himself alone with a farm to manage and two babies on his hands. Of course, he still had his father with him, but the old man was so often crippled with rheumatism that he was rather a drag than a help. There was no one to lend a hand, little ready money, and no one to run the house.

His worries began eleven months ago: to him it seemed eleven years. At first he had hired an elderly woman to keep house for him. She was very good and gentle with the babies, but untidy and absolutely incapable of running the house. Then came his sister-in-law, efficient enough, but frivolous, hard and, worst of all, obviously and boldly intent on catching him. She had to go, after an unpleasant scene.

Now his father had hired this Madeleine Clarandeau.

Corbier knew the family. The mother, a widow on the threshold of old age, worked out by the day.

The children, three girls and a boy, were hired by the year on farms round about, and helped her with a little money. The boy was said to be one of the best farm hands, though rather too fond of drink and, when under its influence, a dangerous chap to quarrel with. The girls of the family he knew less about. Least of all the eldest, Madeleine, who had been working away from home, in the Vendée, for several years.

Now this unknown woman was to keep house for him! A big, strong girl, her brother had said. He hadn't bargained for so much physical strength. Clumsy fingers were not fit to care for Lalie and little Georges. A hulky person, probably,—exuberantly merry and insolently healthy. He had agreed to pay her high wages, too; altogether, he felt irritated over the whole situation.

The young bullocks, no longer feeling his eye on them, suddenly drew wide. He beat them back mercilessly. The young farm hand paused in his work near by, a song on his lips. Corbier yelled at him:

"Use your muscle, damn it! Much good your fiddle-faddle's doing!"

The boy was silent for a moment, then, insolently, began a loud whistling of the same tune and resumed his work,—as leisurely and gawky as ever.

Corbier felt lonely and weak, without the support of human sympathy. Why had Marguerite

had to die? He found himself mumbling words that only accentuated the sadness of his mood.

"Marguerite, why did you leave me so soon? Why did you leave my house for God's house? Why are you no longer on the threshold when I come home from the fields? . . . Marguerite, your children are neglected by strangers. My eyes find no light in the sunshine, my heart no joy under Heaven."

He had come upon a stiff piece of soil, where the oxen needed urging.

"Come on, Galant! Vermeil! Up, lads!" His voice died away in a quaver. He drew himself up, threw back his head in defiance. "Châtain! Lamoureux! Up there! Don't let it beat you!" But the words stuck in his throat. Then, beaten, he drew his hat down over his eyes and let the tears flow.

CHAPTER II

MADELEINE was nearing the Corbier farm known as the "Moulinettes"—the "Little Mills." She had never been there before, but her brother had pointed out the way and besides she could see the new roof of the farmhouse, bright red through the trees. She stopped a moment to look. From a distance the place seemed comfortable and cheerful. Nevertheless she was afraid she might not get to feel at home there. Until now she had been only on large farms where the work was hard but simple and enjoyable. She was given her orders and did as she was told, with no care but to do her task well. She was told to wash, and she washed for twelve hours at a stretch, ate her soup and went to bed. In summer she was told to go harvesting, and she took her sickle and followed the men. It was hard work every day, especially as she had to do her woman's work as well, while the men took their mid-day nap.

But no one had ever told her: "Buy and sell: weigh the butter, give the thread to the weaver." Above all, no one had ever ordered her to take up the baby and change his diapers; to comfort him when he cried; to soothe and chide and cuddle him.

She had never managed anything or any one and whenever children were being discussed in her hearing, she said:

"I don't like them hanging around my skirts; they keep me from doing my work."

When old man Corbier had come to hire her, she had refused, with not a moment's hesitation. But he had insisted, making much of the advantages of the position offered: she'd be, in a way, the mistress of the house, instead of having to obey others; and she'd be only a couple of miles from her mother's. Besides, he himself, whose rheumatic legs kept him so much indoors, would help her in little ways and look after the children. Finally he offered her particularly good wages. So, at last, she gave in, really flattered in her self-esteem as a good and capable woman.

Now that she was drawing near the place, her fears returned. Yet, she walked on briskly. The little creatures in the hedges scattered as she passed; the lizards, hunting among the primroses and wild pansies, drew back swiftly and silently. The titmice and bulfinches rose from their nests and skipped to the upper branches; the blackbirds flew away suddenly with a great rustle of leaves. But none of the birds went far. She felt that they remained hidden there among the willows and holly bushes, and that they were peering out at her anxiously.

"What is this stranger up to, with her bundles and her noisy heels?"

But as she went straight on, they grew confident again and picked up the thread of their song.

Madeleine lifted her head to the tree-tops alive with birds, and she thought:

"Birds of my new home, I know you are welcoming me. Thank you, little dears!"

Her blue eyes lighted up her sunburned face.

"Little songsters of Paradise, are you making music for my wedding? Amen! But I am an old maid and I have no lover. . . . What fine little fiddlers you'd make and how gladly everybody would join in the procession behind you!"

A start interrupted her musings.

"Bad luck!"

Before her, ten steps away, a squirrel was calmly crossing the road. It was an evil omen. It took her breath away. She passed on quickly, turning back to look at the little animal that skipped away now with diabolical agility.

She reasoned with herself. Squirrels were plentiful in this country-side, so full of hazel and chestnuts; they must be crossing everybody's path. It was just old-fashioned superstition to be afraid.

She shrugged her shoulders and forced herself to smile. But it seemed to her that the sparrows fell silent, hiding away under the bushes. In the very

middle of the road a strange shadow was wavering.

Madeleine looked up and saw a bird of prey planing high up in the air; and in the sunlight its great russet wings seemed quite black.

CHAPTER III

THE woman who had come in by the day had gone. Madeleine was alone in the house with the children. Ten o'clock struck. It was time to think of getting dinner. She lighted the fire and hung up the kettle.

The little girl, Lalie, seated in a corner near the table, eyed her curiously.

"What is your name?" asked Madeleine.

"Lalie," answered the little one.

She was about four years old; a pretty child, with black eyes and curly locks, but dirty and dressed like a little old woman in a tight waist and a wide gathered skirt.

"Will you give me a kiss, Lalie?"

The child began to twist her skirt and looked down, smiling.

"Won't you give me a kiss? You needn't be afraid. Do you like sugar almonds, Lalie?"

Madeleine drew a small paper bag out of her pocket.

"Take it! It's for you."

The child kept on twisting her skirt.

"Take it, Lalie, take it!—Why, dear, here it is, just waiting for you to take! Come on!"

Lalie burst into sobs.

"There, now," thought Madeleine. "Isn't she shy, though! It is because I don't know what to say to her. What can I say to the poor little thing?"

She emptied out the almonds on the table within reach of the child and turned away puzzled.

Then she went to the cradle. Drawing back the curtain, she saw a little round head, two plump cheeks. This one, surely, was as beautiful as an Infant Jesus. On the coverlet his little hand lay half curled, white on the back and rosy inside.

Madeleine bent over him and with her work-hardened finger touched the delicate palm that reminded her of a very fine onion skin. There! The tiny hand closed tight. And he held on, the little fellow! He squeezed, he pulled!—How ever could he squeeze as hard as that?

Madeleine tried to free her finger, but no use! Well,—there she was, caught; what was she to do? If she pulled away brusquely, he would wake up.

She waited, schemed, tried to slip away slyly, little by little. Ah, you would, would you? An upheaval under the bed clothes, a kick. The small fist was like a closed trap. You'll stay right here!

Madeleine dared not stir. She waited awhile, feeling very foolish. Her cheeks burned, her legs shook. If anybody should come, he'd ask her what she was doing there, leaning over the cradle. Time passed; was she going to make the men wait for their dinner, the very first day?

No! . . . The baby waked up and immediately began to cry. She picked him up quickly.

He looked at her for a minute, ran his hands over her unfamiliar face, and then, reassured, began to babble and play. He pinched Madeleine's nose, jabbed at her eyes, pulled her hair. He arched his little body, threw himself forward, and plump!—bumped his head against her, with his baby mouth agape.

Eleven o'clock! It couldn't be so late!

Quickly Madeleine sat the baby on a folded blanket on the floor and ran to her work.

When Corbier came in with the farm hands, an hour later, he found the two children in a happy mood and the table nicely set.

Madeleine, who was kneeling beside Jo, rose to her feet and stood up straight before the farmer, a little flushed, and astonished to find him so young.

He spoke a few words of welcome to her and sat down at the table. He thought her plain, but straightforward and gentle.

"Maybe," he thought, "this one will lend her arms to my house and her heart to my children."

The mere thought of it comforted him; and, helping himself to a plateful of soup, he ate it with great relish.

CHAPTER IV

THEY were of the same race, these two: Michael Corbier and Madeleine Clarandeau: an odd race, living in a little known corner of France.

At the time of the Revolution, when the King was guillotined, all the people hereabout—the Corbiers, the Clarandeaus, the Fantous and the others,—no longer all in the same politico-religious camp now—followed the lead of their beloved priests and rose for the King, in their ignorance and loyalty.

Though victorious in their first forward thrust, they soon came to grips with men of their own mettle. On both sides, under the leadership of gentle-eyed youths or stern-souled veterans, the struggle had been desperate.

To the Royalists' battle-cry or the strains of the Marseillaise, every town and village had been taken, re-taken, sacked and burned. There had been fighting in every sunken lane, in every patch of broom, in every clearing. There was not a parish even now, after more than a century, that did not have its "battle mound," its "grave of the Blue Coats" or its "Calvary of the Chouans."

In the end the peasants had been crushed. Other governments had come and conciliated the priests, pacified them so far that many of them had accepted the new state of affairs and taken oath of allegiance to the Republic.

Only the most bitter, the least politic among them had kept on the war in their hearts, and their flocks had followed them into their fierce isolation, into their disdainful disregard of threats and excommunications. But little by little these priests had died off and their flocks had been dispersed.

Now, after 120 years, there were few of these rebels, these Dissenters, left, except in the lowlands of the Vendée, where they had gathered in tiny communities—buffeted, crumbling away, but still not submerged by the flood tide of Catholicism.

Saint-Ambroise was the most important, compact and sturdy of these. It boasted 1,500 Dissenters. They had held their own, because they were a crowd living close together, and because they had the backing of the Protestants.

There was another hardy and vigorous sect, these Protestants. They had come from the country around Fontenay, where their ancestors had been among the first to accept Calvin's message. In those far-off days they had been numerous; sometimes a band of ruffians, and then again a meek and humble flock.

They had been ill treated under the kings, and

the Vendéan Royalists had harried them too. They had hidden, scattered; yet here they were again, now hardly more than a thousand strong, settled partly at Saint-Ambroise, partly at Chantepie and Château-Blanc.

Now that they were no longer persecuted, they took to bickering among themselves. Eager for knowledge, they discussed the latest ideas and their own beliefs; following and outstripping their most advanced pastors, many of them drifted gradually toward irreligion. Some of them, however, from time to time, impelled by a wave of mysticism, reached toward primitive narrowness, toward anathemas, mortification of the flesh and the minatory texts of the Bible.

It was a strange countryside, with its two rival Protestant churches and its Dissenters' chapel, hemmed in by the arrogant chimes of the Catholic churches. All kinds of ancient traditions clashed here, and, although the years had mellowed many hard feelings, at times hate shot forth again into flame. The manner of speech varied from one household to another, as did the manner of dress, of food and of household arrangements, the games, the songs and amusements of the young. The Dissenters excited the liveliest curiosity; but they felt their souls were apart from the others, and, being afraid they might be laughed at, they kept much to themselves.

One time some gentlemen had come from town,—perhaps from Paris itself—who had cleverly overcome their reticence. Soon after, they had been written up in a newspaper. Their chapel was described as a big barn of a building, full of tin Saints and plaster Virgins. The writer had spoken not unpleasantly, but without due reverence, of their holy-water basin and their “museum,”—two things the Dissenters held very dear. Their holy-water basin was like all those that one sees in the Catholic churches, but with this difference, that it was never emptied. The water had been blessed by their last priest and that had been a long time ago. Since then, every day, a few drops of plain water were added, so that it should remain at the same level.

As for their “museum,” it was a collection of little white animals, carved out of meat bones with a pocket knife by an old peasant who was famed for his piety. Granted, they were not as beautiful as the great statues they had in the city churches; still, they had nothing like them in the churches of Saint Ambroise or Chantepie; and the very people who made fun of them would have been incapable of fashioning anything like them. Anyway, when you are invited into a house and made welcome there, you don’t say, on leaving, that the fire smoked and the seats are rickety.

After this experience the chapel was closed to strangers. The Dissenters bent all their energies

against being swamped by the Catholics. The last of their priests had gone and they scorned new priests as they would scorn traitors; so they conducted their services themselves. Perhaps from pride, or from a dim fear of erring on the wrong side, they accentuated their piety, kept all the Saints' days, doubled their days of fasting, observed Lent inexorably. And thus, forgotten heresies, and even ancient superstitions from the buried past, flourished on this rigid Christian faith as wall-flowers and St. John's wart sprout from the sides of an old wall. The women conducted the prayers, the young girls teaching the catechising. Faith in the healing power of mistletoe was revived and trees and springs were revered again.

The Dissenters rarely married outside their own group. They did not care to win over a Catholic by marriage, as such mixed marriages would only produce religious bastards, ready to betray them. But when one of themselves was baptised in the Catholic church, they mourned for him in their hearts.

It rarely happened that a girl thus renounced her faith, but there were always a number of lovestruck young men who allowed themselves to slip into the Catholic tide which never gave them up again. There had been such conversions in the Corbier family—a proud and rugged clan, in truth, but easily ruled by their passions. In the Clarandeau

family, such a thing had never yet happened, but there was danger of it now. The son, the big chap who from childhood had been nicknamed Trooper because of his size and strength, was madly in love with a young dressmaker of Chantepie, one of the standard bearers of the "Children of Mary." True, he had promised his mother and Madeleine never to "change himself," but still they were not easy in their minds, knowing men to be weak and easily swayed.

CHAPTER V

IT was the season when the days are longest. The men rushed from one task to another: the beets had to be planted, the hay taken in, the fields prepared for the winter cabbage. They would never be done with all this in time for the harvest. The oat fields were ripening fast, too fast,—fairly roasted by a hot week in June.

For the women, it was the season for looking after the young poultry with particular vigilance; the critical period when the year's first broods of chicks and goslings were making up their minds whether to drop out or grow up. Things must be made ready, too, for the late broods, and the little pigs born in the spring had to be weaned—all of which demanded care and attention. Especially for the cooks was this a dreaded time, preparing four meals a day, four copious meals on account of the hard out-door work, with nothing but a few vegetables and a little salt pork.

Madeleine got up early. On the stroke of three her wooden shoes began to clatter about on the brick floor of the kitchen: click-clack! Time to get up! Quickly she lighted the fire, picked the vegetables, hurried to the pork barrel. Four o'clock: prayers,

which Madeleine conducted, with old man Corbier giving the responses and the others listening, even the farm hands, one of whom was a Catholic and the other a Protestant.

Half-past four: the table has to be set, the cows milked, the cream separated, the dishes washed—the chicks, the ducklings, the babies—a thousand things!

By nine o'clock at night she was done, sometimes not till ten, when the men were fast asleep.

She knew everything that ought to be done in a house for the comfort of man and beast, but she lacked the experience for proper co-ordination.

Nor was she particularly quick and clever about doing things. For instance, she didn't know how to make the goslings eat from her hand, coax them to swallow their feed prepared of bran and chopped nettles. When showers threatened she ran to the threshing floor to call in her chickens, waving her handkerchief in one hand and her apron in the other:

“Come in out of the rain, little chicks!”

But she went after them too directly and too fast. The chicks gave frightened peeps and scattered around the haystacks; the mother hens puffed out their feathers angrily. Madeleine grew angry, too, and then the rain was on them.

Just then Lalie appeared in the doorway.

“Jo is crying!” Madeleine wouldn't listen.

“Jo is crying, so there! Lalie didn't hit him!”

Madeleine thought:

"You just wait!" And she said:

"Let him cry, it's good for his voice."

The little girl went back into the house, but in a minute she reappeared.

"Jo is crying, there's a pin sticking in his tummy."

Madeleine came back quickly, abandoning her chickens. She knew well enough that Jo had no pin sticking in his tummy, but this familiar complaint always quite upset her.

One evening, while hurriedly changing the baby, she had pricked him with her clumsy fingers. Not seriously, but enough to draw the smallest bead of blood. The child had uttered a quick cry, quite different from his cries of temper, and Madeleine had started, gasping—truly shaken to the depths of her being. For nearly an hour she had rocked the little fellow in her arms. Gladly would she have inflicted some torture on herself, in expiation. When night came, she had taken the baby with her to the bed she shared with Lalie, and held him close, close.

"Jo has a pin sticking in his tummy!" Ten times a day, since then, Lalie made cold shivers run down her back.

Already she had begun to love the children. They occupied her thoughts more than anything else. They made more work for her, too. Lalie poked her little fingers into everything, and Jo wanted to fol-

low her example. He was beginning to walk and took a tumble every few minutes. Being quick tempered, he yelled and stamped his foot all day long.

Madeleine ventured to think: "If I were their mother, I would hire a girl who'd take some of the outside work off my hands, and I'd give more care to the children. As it is, I never have time for them. They are the losers; they play without me, and I haven't had a chance to make them love me, even if they've made me love them."

Old man Corbier, who was to have helped her so much about the house, just now was made young again by the sunny weather and was never indoors. So she was kept very busy and always seemed to be in a hurry.

"Our hired girl," said the old man, "doesn't keep her two feet in the same shoe."

Indeed not; and it was a good thing she didn't.

When she had come to the Moulinettes, she had asked herself anxiously if she ever would get used to things there. Two months had gone by and she had never since had the time to ask herself this question again.

At the other farms where she had been hired, she often thought, while working, of her mother, her sisters, or of her home village, or of her old friends, or of the things one or other young man had said to her. Now, she was always worrying about the animals or the household, and her thoughts no

longer strayed afield and lost themselves in the distance, like wisps of smoke. She had hardly seen anything of the farm beyond her own workaday domain. She who had been so glad in advance that there was such a fine pond at the Moulinettes, with great pines and oaks all round it, had never taken time to go near it. She had merely said to herself:

"If only the children don't take to going down there!"

As for the house, she had grown familiar with every nook and corner of it. She liked it because it was comfortable, and because all the appointments were to her taste. There were two large rooms, divided by a corridor, with a place for keeping the wine and a dairy at the rear. All the floors were neatly bricked in the old-fashioned way.

One of the rooms was furnished with two prettily speckled ash-wood wardrobes and two tall and beautiful four-post beds, in which Michael Corbier and his father slept. The other room, the one they liked to show off to their visitors, held a mixture of furniture. Side by side with an old brown sideboard, a big brown chest and a grandfather's clock in a black case, there were a modern bed and a clothes press of bright, beautifully finished cherry-wood. This bed and the clothes press had been bought by the young couple. They took on an air of extreme youthfulness in this old house, but as

they were good pieces of furniture, simply and carefully fashioned, their newness was attractive rather than disturbing.

To Madeleine the old chimney place was the most interesting thing of all at the Corbiers'. She wasn't surprised at the images of Saints nor at the rosary of enormous boxwood beads, which undoubtedly had never been used for prayers: these were common enough in the Dissenters' homes. But nowhere had she seen firearms like these, nor such a queer old document so nicely framed.

The weapons were two long pistols. A hundred and twenty years ago, the youngest chief of the Catholic Army had given them as a token of friendship to one of the Corbiers, who had been his closest companion.

The framed document was a piece of parchment, on which had been inscribed an event of the war: an adventurous scion of the Corbier family had forced an entrance into a vigorously defended town, along with his Commander. At the bottom, a fat signature—that of the Commander. To the left, the writer, who must have been an expert with his pen, had drawn the picture of a towering wall, with two ladders against it, at the top of which stood two men with drawn swords.

To tell the truth, the picture was slightly blurred, but the Corbiers could explain all the details

minutely when asked about them; they took great pride in it.

The old man had told Madeleine on her first day at the farm not to touch the pistols nor the framed document. This prohibition had vexed her, for she considered herself a careful and capable housewife.

Sometimes, of an evening, when the men were in bed, she was tempted to take down and burnish those old pieces. With the turn of her hand she could have made them as bright and shiny as the candlesticks and the snuffers. She never dared, though, held back from touching these ancient things by a vague dread of committing a sin.

When she was thus alone, with no one around to bother her, she worked quickly and noiselessly. Feeling free to move about as she chose, she was at her best. She put things to rights and made everything ready for the next day's work. Every other day she took her dust cloths and polished the furniture. It was her pride to thus uphold her reputation as an exceptionally able servant.

When she had finished, she drew up the baby's cradle close to her bed and slipped in gently beside little Lalie. The first few nights she had not slept well. Lalie cuddled up close, with her head against Madeleine's neck, like a forlorn little chick. Accustomed to sleeping alone, Madeleine had not rested well with the tickling, disturbing little breath right

on her. But now she was used to it. When the child slipped down, Madeleine never failed to waken enough to raise the little head and cuddle it against her breast.

CHAPTER VI

ON this July Sunday, Michael Corbier was at St. Ambroise and Madeleine was in charge of the house. She was saying prayers alone with the children.

Boiseriot, the Catholic farm-hand, came in. This was also his Sunday on duty. He sat down at the table and called out:

"Where's the soup?"

Madeleine paid no attention, for this was the hour of prayer.

"The soup! The soup!"

He began to bang on the table with the handle of his knife. Before his employers he would never have dared to show his impatience at such a time. Madeleine got up, still holding her rosary, and silently placed the tureen before him; then, as he looked at her with a leering smile, she turned her back on him.

She disliked this man. He was a bachelor around thirty-five, of small build and ordinary appearance. He was a good farm-hand, though, stronger than he looked, but not much of a talker, rather sly and underhanded. Madeleine distrusted him, not because he was a Catholic, but because he looked at her with wicked, glittering eyes.

At twenty-seven, after fourteen years of farm labour, she had often enough, run against the inherent roughness of the male. She had always known how to defend herself laughingly. A little teasing didn't frighten her and, when necessary, she knew how to use her fists. But she did not know how to deal with these silent fellows with the bold eyes.

When Boiseriot had finished eating, he remained sitting at his place, watching her move about. She felt relieved when at last he went away.

That evening, when the baby was asleep, she went out into the front yard; and then she remembered that the men's beds had not been made. The farmhands slept in a lean-to at the end of the grange, and there is where she went now. As she was passing through the stables she saw Boiseriot stretched out there on a bunch of fresh straw. Seeing her come, he sat up and caught her by the leg. She pulled away and passed on, when suddenly he jumped up and threw himself at her like a lecherous beast. She reached out and gave him a blow that stunned him; but not enough to stop him, so she faced him squarely and gave him another blow.

"You dirty beast! Wait till I tell the master!"

"You—pockfaced fiend!" he growled. "You aren't so touchy with other people!"

"Boiseriot, I don't hear you right!"

"Well, I can see right enough! You'll tell the

master, eh? I wouldn't be surprised! I'll get the boot, that's a sure thing. You're already the boss in this house, but I'll go and tell everybody what I know."

"What will you tell, Boiseriot?"

"I'll tell them! And I'll sic the whole neighbourhood on you! And we'll come and raise the devil at your door while . . ."

Madeleine bent over, listening to his shameless talk. Indignation shook her from head to foot.

"Oh, you devil! Take that!"

Madeleine struck out with closed fists, like a man.

"Take that, you dog!—and that, you snake!—Ah! I've got you groggy!—You poor runt, I'd grind you under my heel if it weren't for Christian mercy!"

To keep from striking him any more, Madeleine ran off to the men's quarters, where she relieved her nerves by shaking the feather mattresses.

Behind her, Boiseriot picked himself up and brushed off his soiled clothes. With an evil gleam in his eye, he threatened:

"You pockmarked devil! I'll sic the neighbours on you!"

CHAPTER VII

THAT same evening, little Jo was taken with colic.

Every one was asleep except Madeleine, when the child began to toss about and moan. Madeleine rocked the cradle; still half asleep, she began humming a lullaby in cadence with the ticking of the clock. But the child cried out sharply and flung himself about. Madeleine jumped out of bed, slipped on her petticoat and lighted a candle.

The baby's cries grew worse from minute to minute, and yet there was nothing that could have injured him. He must be sick, taken with some bad illness perhaps, since it had come on so suddenly. She began to walk the floor, rocking him in her arms, but as he would not quiet down, she opened the hall door and called out:

"Corbier! Corbier! The baby is sick! I don't know what's the trouble. I am worried!"

He came out at once, he too in his night shirt and bare-footed, having only just stopped to put on his trousers. Madeleine held the child up a little in her arms, and both of them looked anxiously at the small bit of humanity in pain.

"We ought to have a fire," said Madeleine.

"I'll go," said Corbier.

He went out and returned with some wood and kindling. He was so upset that he blew into the ashes. She had to kneel down beside him to help him start the fire. At last it flamed up. Madeleine sat down and held the baby out toward the warmth.

"If we could give him some tisane——" she said.

So he set about preparing an infusion of marsh-mallow flowers. Madeleine gave it to the child, who, strangely, had just stopped crying. Apparently all right again, he kicked his little legs toward the fire. Cheeks still wet with tears, he laughed aloud while his father waved a burning twig which made a pretty, luminous ribbon in the air before his baby eyes.

How foolish they had been to work themselves up so! They looked at each other, sharing the tenderness they both felt for the baby.

Suddenly Madeleine blushed red hot. In her excitement she had hardly covered her body. Her unbuttoned underwaist left her throat uncovered and her chemise gaped over her great white bosom.

Boiseriot's evil words rang in her ears:

"You aren't so touchy with other people!"

Thanking Corbier, she rose quickly and put the baby back in his cradle.

The baby had fallen asleep again. Corbier had gone back to bed, and Madeleine sat up thinking,—ashamed of having been so careless, and quite upset

by notions that had never troubled her before. She was not in love with Corbier. She could not have fallen in love with him so quickly! Like all girls of her age, she had had suitors. She had rejected several proposals; at other times, it was she who had been jilted. She had been a little annoyed over those incidents, but had got over them easily enough. No, she was not a girl to lose her head all of a sudden, just like that.

She was not in love with Corbier; she loved the children, and her love for them was sweet and held no danger. No doubt, he was a good-looking man, this young master,—and later, if he begged for her love honestly—one had heard of stranger happenings—would she say Yes or No?

To the muffled ticking of the grandfather's clock, the night sped away, and Madeleine lay there with a fever in her veins and her eyes wide open, staring into the darkness of the room.

CHAPTER VIII

OLD man Corbier had time and again warned Gideon, the younger of the two farm-hands:

“Don’t tease Giant; he’s bad tempered and you’ll end by making him kick over the traces.”

Usually, when this subject came up at table, a long discussion followed, with apologies and explanations.

Giant was a descendant of a cow named Marjolée that the old man had bought twenty years before at a Twelfth Night Fair, during one of those very severe winters that we don’t get any more. This Marjolée came from Nantes and was beautiful above, superb below, well built, and a great producer of butter. Try to find cows like her nowadays! There had been Griselle out of her, Farinière out of Griselle, and out of Farinière there were Pomponne and Giant, the gray bull with the black collar.

A powerful strain, unequalled for labour and fairly quick to fatten. Unfortunately they were too frisky. The cows were domineering with their stable companions. They broke down the hedges, jumped over the fences. As for the bulls, they had to be broken in very young, otherwise they were likely

to become dangerous. The breaking in of Giant had been delayed too long, because he was so handsome.

"Giant will tickle your ribs," said the old man. The two farm-hands and the young master shrugged their shoulders, used as they were to living with cattle.

Gideon never came near the bull without teasing him. The bull responded, clanking his chain, lowering his head with a long, threatening bellow which rumbled in his giant throat. Gideon mocked him:

"Moo-oo, Boo-oo. . . . Come on, Giant."

Sometimes he grasped the bull by the horns and the bull, entering into the game, pushed hard.

Little by little things grew bad, but the boy did not leave off, for whenever he was alone he took a keen pleasure in trying his young strength to the point of danger. He really fought with the beast, kicking it with his wooden shoes, and evading the still uncertain thrust of the horns.

One day, at last, things became ugly. Giant started the fray and went into it with all his might. The young man had only just time to jump out of the stall, dropping his armful of fodder.

"What's the trouble?" asked Michael Corbier, coming on the scene.

"It's Giant, sir. If I hadn't got out, he would have butted me into the rack."

Michael took it badly.

"If you'd only leave him alone! Why tease the

animals and spoil their tempers, especially when you are a coward yourself?"

The lad straightened.

"A coward? No more of a coward than the next one, I'll have you know! Animals are just animals, and I don't want to be trampled on."

"Very well then. Get out! I'll give him his feed myself."

"Look out for him, I warn you."

Corbier shrugged his shoulders and went to get an armful of feed. The bull had never been unfriendly with him.

"Turn around, Giant."

He threw his armful and found that some of the hay had fallen under the animal's hoofs.

"You rascal, wasting the feed I give you!"

He stooped down, picked up a few large fistfuls and was straightening up again, when the bull went at him with his head. He rolled over on the floor, tried to shout, but could not find his voice. He succeeded, however, in partly raising himself and slipping into the manger. Fortunately Gideon had not gone far. With a bravery and promptness one would not have expected of him, he jumped at the bull's head.

"Help! Boiseriot, help!"

The bull hurled himself at the crossbar, a solid oak beam, snorting and growling and wild-eyed. Boiseriot came running from the grange with a heavy

iron bar. Madeleine came running, too; at the first cry she had jumped up from her milking stool, overturning the stool and spilling her pail of new milk. She attacked the bull from behind, trying to tie his hind legs and throw him. He gave her a kick and she rolled over on the straw.

Boiseriot struck with his iron bar, but in vain, hindered by Gideon, who was hanging on to the horn and the muzzle. Corbier at last managed to shout:

“A rope!”

Madeleine had already thought of that. She ran to the grange and came back with a leather strap. The bull was gathering himself up for a final effort. Seeing him draw his hind legs together, she quickly fastened the strap around them and threw herself backward.

“Boiseriot!”

The man turned to her.

“Get to his side,” she said. “I am going to throw him.”

A brief gleam flickered in his evil eyes. She was struck by it.

“Hurry up!” she cried in a colorless voice.

He put his shoulder against the bull’s flank and, Madeleine pulling sharply, the bull fell.

Corbier scrambled out by way of the rack. He wasn’t much hurt, and he forced himself to laugh, though still pale and breathless. The farm-hands

were laughing too. Gideon wiped his right hand, which was bloody from the bull's nostrils. Boiseriot looked at Madeleine, who was trembling so hard now that she had to lean against the wall for support. Michael said, when it was all over:

"Thank you, all of you. I can't talk. I'm going to get a drop of brandy."

He left the stable and Madeleine followed him. After a bit she came back.

"Well," said Gideon, "all right now?"

"Yes, he's better since he had a drink. But I—I can't seem to pull myself together."

She picked up her milking stool and resumed her work. Boiseriot, who was bringing in an armful of feed, kept his eye on her. Noticing that in her agitation she was trying absent-mindedly to milk a cow she had already milked, he sneered as he brushed past her:

"You were afraid for him, weren't you? . . . Devil take you, I'll sic the boys on you yet!"

CHAPTER IX

WHO said that?" asked Trooper of his mother. Madame Clarandeau replied:

"I don't know. . . . I only know that people are talking about it and it worries me."

"Who told you that people are talking about it?"

The old woman grew nervous.

"Never mind about that, boy. I can attend to such things better than you; there must be no fuss over this."

She knew her son. Gentle and sensible when sober, he became quarrelsome after drinking; and with his enormous strength, an accident was always possible. . . .

She insisted:

"If you take a hand in this, you will only make things worse."

He shook his great head.

"Mother, I haven't been drinking, you can look at me. . . . I swear to you there'll be no drink until I have ploughed this furrow. So you needn't be afraid. Who said that Madeleine was living in sin with Michael Corbier, of the Moulinettes?"

"What'll you do to him if you get to know?"

"I'll talk to him. I know how. All you need

to do to stop a slanderer's tongue is to talk to him in the right way."

"Supposing it's a woman?"

"Oh, well . . . if it's a woman, you can deal with her, but if it's a man, you leave him to me. Who told you about this slander?"

Madame Clarandeau had to give in.

"Who told me about it? Marie Fantou, this morning before the rosary prayers, and it seems that it came from a farm-hand at the Moulinettes, a fellow named Boiseriot, a Catholic."

"Boiseriot, you say? All right. Good-bye, mother. I'll see you again next Sunday."

"Good-bye, and keep cool, whatever you do!"

Upon the threshold he turned around.

"Don't worry. I haven't been drinking and I shan't go to the inn. Good-bye."

From Coudray to St. Ambroise, Trooper almost ran. He was thinking.

"Boiseriot! I don't know him, but he must be from Chantepie. Violette was telling me one day about a fellow of that name. It's Sunday to-day—Bet you I'll find that mass-hound at St. Ambroise."

When he had reached the village, he said to himself:

"Mother was right: Better not make a fuss. I don't know him. I might question these fellows who are playing bowls, but they might suspect something. I'm not so simple!"

He entered a tobacco shop, bought a cigar and dawdled over lighting it, leaning against the door and muttering,

"Well, well!"

The storekeeper asked:

"What are you looking at, Mr. Clarandeu?"

"Nothing. I thought that was Boiseriot, that fellow passing by."

"Boiseriot?"

"Yes, the farm-hand at the Moulinettes."

The wife of the storekeeper explained to her husband:

"Yes, you know, the little one who chews. . . . He was here only a minute ago. He just left."

"Thank you very much," said Trooper.

He went out quickly and up the street.

"You wait, you dog, with your quid! Ah, there you are! You weren't far off. I'll give you something to think of on the way!"

Having caught up with the man, Trooper said to him:

"Is your name Boiseriot?"

"At your service."

"Then I've a few things to say to you that won't take long."

Boiseriot's eyes wavered uncertainly.

"What's the matter with you?" said he.

"I was just going to tell you. You don't know me, do you?"

"Oh, yes; you are a Clarandeau, the one whom they call Trooper. You have a girl at Chantepie—Violette, the seamstress?"

"Boiseriot, that is none of your business."

"Pardon me, Violette is my god-child."

Trooper gave a start, which did not escape his companion's notice. They walked on a little, and then:

"Boiseriot, you've been talking about my sister and the man she works for. And I am angry. I heard of it only to-day. If I were drunk, I'd be likely to make trouble for you."

The other, realizing the effort he was making to control himself, faced about.

"I'm not afraid of any man."

"You can say that! You're not big enough for me to take you on. If I had been drinking, I wouldn't say—when I'm lit, I don't always look so close—who happens to get under my fists."

"Does that happen often?"

"No oftener than I can help; sometimes, just the same, I get into bad company."

"Does Violette know about your ways?"

Boiseriot glanced up sideways, waiting for an answer. Trooper shook his big body and let the words come fast:

"Never mind about that! You have—— Somebody has talked about my sister. For this once, let it pass! If it happens again, I'll get hold of the

slanderer, whether he be Peter or Paul, Dissenter or Catholic or Protestant, friend or stranger or enemy—and I'll knock him down and drag him through the streets till his head cracks! Good-bye!"

Boiseriot began to laugh.

"You're strong but stupid. Why should I talk about your sister, when you are almost my god-son? And do you think I would want to make trouble with my boss? Go and ask him if we ever had a word of difference between us."

"What I've said I've said; and you may tell everybody else. Good-bye!"

"So long! Take the trouble to find out who your friends are."

They parted, Boiseriot, entirely over his fright, smiled in an ugly fashion, and Trooper walked slowly without turning around, his heart in a turmoil.

CHAPTER X

ANOTHER Sunday; a Sunday in August, at the quiet hour of siesta.

Michael Corbier had thrown himself down on his barn floor, hat over eyes. The flies had kept him awake at first with their persistent noisy buzzing; now that he had fallen asleep they were busier than ever about him, but he had taken the precaution of burying his head in an armful of straw, so that only his hands remained exposed, and there the skin was hardened and almost insensible.

The sun was beating straight down; the two rows of piled sheaves were like the walls of an overheated passage. All that great heap of straw crackled, so ripe, so dry and baked it was. The sleeper gasped for air, oppressed by this furnace heat.

"Good God!"

He had wakened with a sudden nervous start. He did not stop to stretch himself; his eyes were wide open all at once.

"Good God! This is awful!"

He mumbled to himself, cross and upset, his mouth feeling dry and bitter.

Every time he took a nap in the heat of noon, it

was the same thing. Could he never again defend himself against these dreams? Would he never again enjoy the sound sleep of a tired man?

No sooner did he lie down on that floor now, than he felt a strange softness flooding his veins.

At first vague forms came passing before his eyes, beings and objects that he could not have named: elfin forms swirling in satanic rounds; sarabands, wafting into his face an air charged with a hot, loathsome redolence that made his senses reel. Then, at last, he "saw clear." He did not see sometimes one thing, sometimes another; he always saw the same blue eyes, deep as sin, and then a whiteness that took shape, became a woman's throat, an amorous woman's throat, throbbing, swelling, growing—growing till it filled his whole vision with its vast, triumphant whiteness.

Then desire rose within him like a storm fiend.

Bolt upright, both shoulders freed of the straw, he took count of his shame. His grief over the death of his wife filled his heart.

"Marguerite, you know it isn't that I've forgotten you! You are with me when I work; your hand is still in mine, softer than the hands of all living women."

He crinkled his eyelids as if to fix more clearly the elusive visions of his happiness, to which he wanted to cling.

But other intruding thoughts besieged his brain.

Vainly he tried to drive them off like annoying flies. They kept buzzing around in his head, vivid, obstinate, cruel.

He was glad when his father got up at the other end of the barn and came toward him. His father talked often and willingly of the time, not so long past, when life lay before Michael like a flowery path.

"Did you sleep, father?"

The old man sat down on the straw beside him.

"Not much: the flies are terrible. Did you?"

"Oh! I!——"

The phrase remained suspended and the father knew that the old heart-wound was again open. He did not stir, but his eyelids twitched.

There had never been any unpleasantness between father and son and they felt for each other a true, manly affection, a tenderness which, though silent, was watchful and deep.

The father was thoughtful for a moment, groping for words of comfort. Finding none that would satisfy him, he ended by saying:

"Better not borrow! Sell your harvest right away. The market is low, but it's better to sell than to borrow."

"What were you saying, father?"

"I say it'll give you cash in hand—at least two hundred pistoles. You can do a lot with a sum like that."

Michael made a gesture of disillusioned indifference. He was so far from all that! He thought:

"My purse is empty: why isn't my heart like my purse? Why is it bulging with worthless coin?"

"Well, now!" exclaimed the father, who misunderstood the gesture. "Well, now!—Two thousand francs, for certain, at least! It's a pretty penny.—You're another one of those fellows that cry before they're hurt."

Michael let him talk on, glad to have his mind brought back to these simple, homely cares.

Work-a-day troubles were a known enemy that you were used to wrestle with.

He began to do some counting, in an instinctive effort to get away from himself.

"Two thousand francs, that's at least three hundred less than the harvest is worth, and even so, it wouldn't be enough to make ends meet: there's 1,400 francs for the leasehold, 870 for the two hands; and how about the cost of threshing? And the hired girl?"

"Don't borrow; debts are the ruination of any farm!"

"Then what can we do? Sell something?"

That roused the old man.

"Sell! Not while I'm alive, you won't! The Chestnut Hill land has been in our family, time out of mind, the way the gentry have theirs. As for the two other parcels, your mother and I bought them.

And how we toiled and sweated to get those few acres!"

"I toil and sweat too, father. I, too, break my back working the soil, oftener than I walk about with my head in the clouds. And all I see ahead is trouble, because I have no longer anyone but you who cares, and no hand to help me."

Beneath the gently spoken words, rebellion rang out clear. The father was moved to say:

"Poor boy, you're in hard luck, for certain. But it's no use being rebellious about it. A man can't rise up against it, nor yet lie down under it: he can only keep going—that's all."

"Well, I keep going, don't I!"

They fell silent, sitting quite still with their heads bowed, as proud men do to hide their emotion.

Then the father spoke again, falteringly, discreetly feeling his way.

"Sure enough, you're in bad luck—and you are a good fellow—you deserve better. If you didn't have to pay the wages of a hired girl—a first rate girl, too—things would be easier, maybe. Though, speaking of her, you're in luck there: your house isn't kept just any old way—like some houses I could mention."

"Pshaw! It's kept the same as other houses!"

"Now, let's be fair!—That girl—you wouldn't find her like, I tell you. I see how things go—I'm a good deal around the house.—Well, I couldn't fail

to notice how much trouble she's taking. Look around! Everything is neat and tidy—Look at the stock, look at her dairy.—And besides, there's another reason why she's better than the others. She makes your children as comfortable and cosy as two kittens in the sun. I'm telling you just what I see, my boy."

"Maybe so, but a servant is a servant: You pay her wages and she quits. That kind of paid help can never be like—the other."

"All right, I don't say—But see here now, boy—when you're over your grief——"

"I'll never get over it."

"You say that. And it's true, one never does get over it quite.—But a man argues himself out of it, bye and bye.—Do you mind if I speak out, Michael?"

"Of course not!" the young man said expectantly. "You, father, you can say anything at all to me."

"Well, son, you ought to marry again. Don't let that hurt you now! I don't say this year or next—you understand?—but when time has soothed you a bit. All the same, the sooner the better, for your house and for your children. You've got a good housekeeper, but as you say, she might leave any day."

"And must I marry her, then, to make her stay?" Michael threw out the words quickly, angrily.

"I'm not speaking for her nor for any other

woman I know. That's your affair. All I want to say, if you don't mind, is that you need someone like her—yes, that kind, sure enough—a good housewife who'll be kind to the children and who'll go with them to our chapel."

"Father, don't let's talk about it any more, please!"

He rose to his feet with a quick twist of his shoulders.

"There, now! I've made you angry!" mumbled the father.

"Angry? Not at all! I'm just going over there—walk a little.—My legs are all numb."

He went toward the farm buildings and around them, passing through the goat pasture in the rear. Everything neat and tidy, his father had said. He was forced to admit that so it was. Some wash was drying on the hedge, all carefully spread out. He noticed some dishcloths—mere rags, but washed very white. Why had she taken so much trouble over them? Did she think she might still make some use of them?

He took the path to the pond. On fine Sundays like this, he used to stroll along it with Marguerite and Lalie. In the shade of a big oak at the edge of the shimmering water, he had lived the tenderest hours of his life.

He reached the meadow,—found it as soft and springy as ever under his tread. He walked along

the border hedge: as in other days, the hazel nuts were ripening in their little yellow cups,—just like the nuts he had held out to Marguerite at the tips of bent branches and that she had cracked between her pretty teeth. As in other days, there was the wagon gap in the hedge, beside a rowan-tree from which the blackbirds scurried; from that point you could see the pond and, leaning forward a little, the round top of that same oak in the shadow of which——

“Ah!”

He stood still.

In the shadow of that great oak, at the edge of the shimmering water, a young woman in Sunday finery was playing with a little child—as in other days!

CHAPTER XI

ALL through the week Lalie had begged Madeleine to take her nut-gathering, and this very Sunday Madeleine had at last given in.

As the weather was fine, she had dressed the children in their prettiest. That very morning, she had purchased, with her own money, a small bottle of scent for them. She had sprinkled it lavishly over their hair, and the baby in her arms was fragrant as a nosegay.

In the hedge by the meadow—how beautiful the meadow was!—she had picked hazel nuts. And then she had strolled down to the pond, behind Jo who had trotted ahead, darting to right and left. How shiny the pond was!

In the shade of an oak she sat down and cracked the nuts. Using her best pocket knife, that she kept for wedding feasts and such great occasions, she opened the brown shells, while two little greedy mouths watched for the kernels.

*Down where my garden flowers twine,
On air I go, O heart of mine,
To pluck the rose and columbine;—
The air is light as wine!*

There she was, actually singing! What made her heart so light? Perhaps the pretty pearl-handled

knife, so dainty that she hardly felt it in her hand, was a lover's gift? Not so. All it recalled to her mind was feasting—no memory of courtship, nothing that touched her heart. Was it then because the meadow was so lovely? Because the pond shimmered so? Because the children were laughing and smelled sweet as aromatic herbs?

No, no—none of these was a reason—

*A thrush comes winging from a vine;—
On air I go, O heart of mine!*

Jo wanted to sing, too; Lalie shouted:

“Yoo! Yoo-oo!”

*And greets me with his merry line:
“The air is light as wine!”*

A softness had come over Madeleine, like the touch of a hand. She felt her bosom throbbing with a great, groundless joy that was all pervading and yet fragile. When she was eighteen, of a festive morning when the young people were preparing for a party, she had felt like this—as light as a sparrow.

“What a foolish thing I am! Poor bee in the rain! November swallow!”

The air is light as wine!

The little ones hung about her neck with shouts and pummelings and peals of laughter and strenuous, awkward wrestlings. She let herself tumble over, surrendered her head to them, played with them for

a while, forgetful of all else and overwhelmed with tenderness.

"Madeleine! Come here! Madeleine!"

Lalie, who quickly tired of any game, had gone close to the railing at the edge of the pond. At first she had thrown pebbles into the water. Now that she had exhausted the supply, she was throwing in some belladonna berries.

"Madeleine, see the fish!"

Madeleine came close with the baby. The water, looking black from a distance, was on the contrary wonderfully limpid. When a berry touched the surface, the fish rose to it from below. They were small but very lively roach; their yellow eyes, their round mouths and pink, lacy fins were clearly visible. They snapped up the berries so quickly, you hardly saw them swallow.

"Snap! Snap! There's another— The greedy things!"

"Lalie, you mustn't lean over so far. Come, Lalie!"

Madeleine took the children back under the oak. She had been afraid of the water ever since childhood. A half-witted old aunt had told her so many stories about bad fairies and black water witches that she always felt a kind of mysterious, fearsome fascination in the sleepy waters of a pond.

"You mustn't go too near, do you hear me, dear?"

The water is full of wicked creatures, that pull little children in by the feet!"

"Let's play, Madeleine!" said Lalie without listening. "I'll be a peddler woman, I'll be selling pins; Jo'll be a little boy and you'll be his mamma. You're inside your house. You see? These little sticks are my pins. I'll knock at your door—'Anybody at home?' You'll say, 'How do you do, Ma'am, I want some pins to pin my little boy's didies'—do you hear, Madeleine? Jo is a little boy, you are his mamma! If you'd rather, I could be selling sugar almonds. Jo'll say, 'Mama, I want some candy'—"

"Silly! Don't you know he can't talk yet? Just listen to him!"

"Ma—ma—ma!" babbled Jo.

"We must teach him, Madeleine! Jojo, say 'Mam-ma, I want——' "

"Ma—ma—ma—Ooh!"

"You don't know how to play, Jo," said his sister; "Lalie is going to play all by herself."

Madeleine, with a sudden flush, had picked up the baby; she held him up before her, her face close to his.

"Jo, my little Jojo, say 'mam-ma, mam-ma'——"

She raised pleading eyes. Her tender emotion of the afternoon was sweeping her on to this strange, unknown passion of feeling— Falling in love must be like that! She was carried away—unashamed.

"Jo! Listen! Mam-ma! Mam-ma!"

"Madeleine!"

Her shoulders sank together, the blood rushed to her heart. Corbier was standing behind the hedge, a few steps away.

For one instant Madeleine's eyes were wide and radiant; for one instant a great brightness flooded her soul— Then everything went dark. Corbier, white-faced, raised his hand as if to hurl the words at her:

"Madeleine! This is mortal sin! I forbid you this abomination!"

CHAPTER XII

FOR three days they said no word to each other. At meal times Madeleine fed the children and took her own meals standing by the fireplace, without a word.

Corbier spoke to his father or to the hands without ever turning his head toward his housekeeper. Contrary to his habit, Boiseriot grew facetious. From under his peak cap his wolfish eyes glistened with malicious glee.

On the second day, in the barn, Michael had answered a question of his father in a vague way, turning pale:

"There's nothing wrong—but, after you, I'm the only master here."

The master! yes—the one who gave orders to the farm-hands, who planned for the plowing and the sowing, the buying and selling; but he was not master of his own imaginings. In truth, he did not know what was in his heart, whether love or hate, kindness or anger. There was pride, for a certainty, the pride of resisting the surge of his strong young blood; the pride, too, of not going back on a too harsh word.

It was much the same with Madeleine. She had

cried with shame; cried with the pain, too, of an unexpected, brutal and secret wound. The unacknowledged dream that had sprung up and flowered in her like a white bush hidden under denser foliage had been hacked down, pulled out by the roots. The hurt was too cruel. Whack! One great blow of the axe at a fragrant hawthorn—one thrust of the spade in the middle of a flowerbed!

All for a bit of playfulness!—for it was all in play, really! Lalie had started the game—he might have inquired, first—then he would have understood!— Such awful words, to her!— Loving the children was no reason why she should be thinking of anything wrong. She did love the children,—very, very much—she had indeed quite lost her heart to them!—and why not? Why shouldn't she show it, too?

“‘Mortal sin!’ Perhaps you are thinking things, Michael?—because you are good to look at! My Lord, you are not the only one!”

It had come to Wednesday evening, and Madeleine was feverishly clearing the table. The men had gone to their rooms; the children were asleep.

“I’ll go away. I can’t stay on after what he said. I’d grown used to the place, but all I care about is the children—truly!— I’ll miss them, the darlings,—but none of the others!— I’ll go to a big farm, like last year; I’ll have more freedom there. They are getting me all muddled between them,

those I like and those I don't like. In the end, I don't know which way to turn. And work all the time, from sun-up to sun-down, and 'way into the night, and before dawn sometimes, too. Nobody to lay out the work for you, and no thanks to you!— I ought to have left right away. When I see him come in and sit with the others, never looking at me, it's—it's humiliating!— He is angry, of course; but if he'd only speak out, as before, his anger would pass, maybe. But he won't!— All right, then! I quit, Michael Corbier! You can hire somebody else, one that's better looking.— You can marry her, for all I care."

Madeleine threw down the cloth she used for rubbing the furniture; but she picked it up again, thinking:

"I'll quit, but I won't have the blame put on me! I'll do my work to the end and he'll have no fault to find with me. To-morrow he's got to pick a quarrel with me. I'll get angry and then, good-bye! How could I manage it?— Ah! I've got it!"

She jumped on a chair and took down the pistols. Then she went to fetch a large piece of emery paper and started to rub and polish.

"Ah, you old popguns, you! I'm going to make you shine like the candlesticks in the chapel."

Madeleine!— Mortal sin!

"B-rr! Do you think it is? Just because you've served to kill enemies with?")

Madeleine, I forbid you this abomination!

"Or maybe women too, and robbers perhaps, in the time when people were worse than savages?—Say that again, Corbier, that it was an abomination——"

A scene would now be inevitable; she would leave on the spot.

That very night she would get her belongings together, so that she could pack them up at a minute's notice. She opened her clothes-press, folded up her skirts, looked about for her handkerchiefs.

The children's things were mixed up with hers. Angry as she was, it wrung her heart to pick them out and lay them away separately.

She took her bottle of scent and set it on the top shelf, right in the centre. She had bought it for them and she'd leave it to them. But the girl who'd take her place would probably use it for herself. Ah, not that! Certainly not!

Then she took out the little vests and stockings, the baby's bibs, and Lalie's pinafores and hair ribbons. When she had them all spread out on the table, she emptied her bottle on them, drop by drop, as if she were sprinkling holy water.

"My little darlings—may it bring you happiness!"

She wanted to do something more for them, but it was late; and so that she might not call attention

to her doings, she stepped out of her wooden shoes and went about the room noiselessly.

She found holes in Jo's stockings and mended them. Lalie was growing fast; her Sunday pinafore had become too short. She'd soon have nothing nice to put on of a Sunday, and she wouldn't look as neat and pretty as the other little girls, who hadn't lost their mothers.

Madeleine had an apron of old print, with a red flower pattern; she cut it up and, with a skill that astonished even herself, she made a flounce of it to lengthen the pinafore, and a new belt, too.

It was almost midnight; she worked on with painstaking slowness.

When the pinafore was made as good as new, she looked about to see what else she could do. Nothing. All the poor little clothes were mended and clean and neat.

Her work all done, Madeleine broke down and cried.

In what state would everything be in a couple of weeks? Who would be taking care of Jo? Would anyone think of him, except to stuff him with thick soup? He was still used to getting his bottle when he was put to bed. Twice a day he got a new-laid egg, boiled very soft, and it took some patience to feed it to him in little spoonfuls.

"My poor babies! But after all, it's not impossible that the woman your father will get in my

place will be good to you. You'll love her, you'll forget Madeleine,—and when you've grown up you won't even remember me."

Her tears trickled on the garments as she laid them away again in the clothes-press.

"But I can't stay on. Your father is wicked—I am wicked—people grow wicked when they grow up. They don't know how to forgive things. We aren't any better than they were in the old time when they kept fighting each other."

Madeleine wept as she looked at the cradle and at her shiny new-fashioned bed, where Lalie was sleeping.

She had a box where she kept some ribbons, a ring, a pin and a little silver necklace. She slipped the necklace around Lalie's neck, under the hair. As for Jo, she had nothing to give him that would be suitable to his age. And during the four months she had been at the Moulinettes she had not thought of buying a single trifle for him to remember her by.

But then, she had never thought of leaving so soon!

At any rate she'd keep him close to her as long as she could. As soon as she had undressed she lifted the baby out of his cradle and took him with her to bed.

The baby half awoke and grumbled because he had lost the nipple that he was used to go to sleep with. His two little hands fumbled about Made-

leine's bosom; he bumped his head into it,—lips parted and searching.

Madeleine had stopped crying. She was not quite asleep yet, but her thoughts were wandering away, escaping her to whence she could not call them back. The baby had nestled against her, and as she slipped away into dreamland she still felt the solace of the moist little mouth against her breast.

Ding! ding! ding!

With a gurgle like running water the old clock in the corner warned that it was three.

Madeleine jumped out of bed. In her bare feet, without stopping to clothe herself, she ran to the fireplace and tried to smudge the shining pistols with a greasy cloth,—stealthily, like someone doing something wrong.

No use! At breakfast everybody noticed the harm that had been done. Michael said nothing, but his father flared up angrily:

“Madeleine, I told you not to do that!”

Madeleine turned very red and apologised, pretending she had forgotten. And, before them all, she humbly let the old man scold her like a silly schoolgirl.

CHAPTER XIII

AS usual, the Corbiers and the Darus, of Chestnut Hill, had joined forces for the threshing. This year, they were the last of the neighbourhood to thresh. As it was late in the season, they were able to hire the machine and crew cheap; but they saved little because of the usual feasting that terminates the year's threshing time.

It was Saturday, a fast day for the Dissenters but a meat day for the Catholics. So there were two tables set up at the Corbiers' for fear of a row among the tipsy yokels.

All had gone well at breakfast. The Corbiers had thirty-five men working for them,—men of all ages and of various faiths. But as they had been threshing side by side now for more than a month around the countryside, they were used to one another and rarely quarrelled.

Trooper had been let by his employer, a farmer named Rivard, down the valley. He hadn't touched wine during the whole threshing season. Madeleine, who was afraid he might weaken on this last day, stopped him in the passage:

"See here, now! No foolishness! I wouldn't like it——"

He had replied:

"I'm feeding the threshing machine and I wouldn't like to be fed to it!"

And since they were alone and he was very fond of this older sister of his, he had gone on frankly:

"Besides, just to see you helps to keep me straight, big sister. If you'd like, I'll sit beside Samuel the Salvationist at the dinner table, and you can put a pitcher of water between us."

The tables were set up in the barn to the left of the farm buildings. Madeleine had her kitchen to herself. She had hired for the day an elderly woman to help her, a Dissenter who followed the threshing machine from one farm to another, washing the dishes and carrying wine to the workers, toward evening, when the men began to get a little too forward with the girls.

Madeleine's two younger sisters had come to help her also: Tiennette and Fridoline; the last more of a red-head than Madeleine, and Tiennette as young and fresh and full of laughter as a shepherdess out of a book.

Madeleine looked after the children and managed everything. Fridoline took charge of the fasters' table, where there was a great supply of food. She was a good cook and the men didn't bother her much because she didn't have much use for their pleasant-ries; also, perhaps, because she was not particularly good-looking.

Tiennette and the old woman had charge of the meat table, which needed much less care; two or three great platters of meat, cooked hit or miss, with water, butter and salt,—without measuring or tasting, of course. The old woman hung over the pots, looking like a sourceress who would throw in salt and maledictions together.

Tiennette had plenty of time and to spare. The kitchen work bothered her far less than the men's teasing. There were six of them who carried the grain sacks; not all of them good looking, but all as young as herself—six boys of eighteen years, who trotted in single file through the passage and up to the loft. Gideon, who was one of them, gave himself airs of importance because he was one of the household. He showed the others where to empty their sacks and, in passing, stepped into the kitchen to say:

"The Dathel field has grown big ears all right, but some of the husks are empty."

"That's too bad," said Madeleine, listening to the wheat running from the sacks up there in the loft, which meant the wealth of the farm.

Sometimes the lad would tear down stairs breathlessly and shout in:

"I'm all done up! Tiennette! Tiennette! Come and help me!"

"Stupid!" the girl would reply, "if you put your dirty fingers on my collar I'll box your ears."

Nevertheless she managed to be standing in the hall, waiting for him to pass by again, with a little air of expectancy.

"Tiennette, give me a drink."—"Tiennette, something's burning in your pots!"

"It'll be good enough for you! What table are you going to sit at, you bad boy of a Protestant?"

"Me? At the one where you serve the soup."

"Of course! At the meat table,—you villain of a Protestant!"

"Tiennette, day after Carnival I'll eat your cheeks!"

He teased her with such simple pleasantries, and she pretended to be angry. When they happened to be alone, he kissed her without any ado on her part.

The other five were scarcely less noisy. They, too, teased Tiennette, but she drove them away with loud protests, and as they were all very young, they did not dare to touch her with their soiled hands.

Besides, they had their work, and a minute of fooling meant five minutes of rushing.

Time was short. The threshing machine had to swallow some six thousands sheaves that day, and although she was a great eater, there must be no loitering if the work was to be finished before night.

The feeders at the machine, standing on the narrow footholds at her sides, pushed the ears in carefully. Sometimes they threw in whole sheaves,

which she ate up with a pleased bark; a short second, and there came from the depths of her long black jaws a rattle of extraordinary satisfaction; then, instantly, she began all over again to snarl, to rumble and roar.

Six men were serving the machine: two who cut the bands and prepared the sheaves, and four feeders, who threw the grain into the hopper, each in his turn. In all there were some fifty men.

The younger men climbed on top of the stack and flung down the sheaves; the strongest among them were at the sacks; the older men took the slower and more particular work, raking and sorting the broken ears, or were employed at such work as the young fellows avoided on account of the dust.

To build up the straw stacks there were seven or eight husky lads, proud of their strength. The tossers prepared enormous forkfuls for them and when they stuck their forks in and lifted up the load, they were completely hidden under the straw, which seemed to be slowly moving up of its own accord along the long ladders.

One of them, a tall, dark fellow with a very fine voice, sang uninterruptedly an interminable song of almost similar couplets. The others tried to sing with him, but their voices could not follow his. They preferred to howl a sort of accompaniment from the ladder tops, stopping now and then to shout:

"Give us a drink! A drink!"

Then Tiennette came and poured out wine for them, and they all found her good to look at, even those whose affections were already engaged.

It was a great day for drinking. Even the elderly straw-tossers welcomed the bottle and, glass in hand, they told funny stories. Tiennette went from one to the other, gliding between the pitchforks and climbing over the straw, light and nimble as a young white goat. Coming up to the machine, she held up the bottle.

' "Hey there, feeders!"

But they didn't hear, so absorbed were they in their strenuous task; or else they shook their heads quickly, as much as to say:

"No, no! Not now!"

The second time Tiennette came around, Boiseriot and Trooper, whose turn it was to rest, called to her. But Trooper took nothing but a drink of water, and Boiseriot remarked on it:

"Water? Are you afraid of a glass of wine to-day—a man like you?"

"I know myself, you see," said Trooper. "After the second glass, I'm inclined to do wild things. When the job's done, I can drink as much as I want. Anyway," he added, pointing at the others, "there'll be enough of them lit up pretty soon, without me."

When Corbier's crew gathered in the barn for

the mid-day meal, their joking became at once noisy and rough. The heavy wine flowed fast: Tiennette was kept running to the house for more.

From the end of the meat table, Gideon called for her ten times oftener than anybody else, and she never failed to hear his voice above the others.

"Tiennette, listen!"

Once he leaned over and said something in her ear. At that moment Samuel, the one whom they called the Salvationist, a man in the forties, who sat opposite at the other table, touched Tiennette's arm and said in a low, very polite voice:

"Mademoiselle, will you be good enough to fill this pitcher with water?"

Irritated, she repeated loudly:

"Fill this pitcher with water! hey, here's one of a new kind! He wants water!"

Everybody laughed and Gideon shouted:

"He isn't a man; he's a duck!"

Samuel turned scarlet.

"You're insulting, young man," said he. "I insult nobody. I'm merely living up to my convictions—Besides, if your education hadn't been neglected, you'd know that wine——"

Heedless of his surroundings, he turned his feeble frame around on the bench and launched an address, punctuated by lean gestures—a sermon such as are heard at temperance meetings.

At first there was silence, as they didn't know

what to make of his talk; but soon they began to jeer at him.

Another one of those queer fellows—this Samuel,—they thought. Wasn't he trying to tell them that it was a sin to drink wine?

Gideon shouted again, delighted with his joke:

"He's a duck!" And when Tiennette brought the pitcher of water he took it excitedly out of her hand and, pouring a glassful, said: "There, duckling! Stick your bill in that!"

Taking no notice of the insolence, Samuel raised his glass:

"I drink the water of Redemption——"

Gusts of laughter drowned the rest of his speech. Gideon, still holding the water-pitcher, yelled:

"Don't spare it, old man, if it does you any good!"

At the Dissenter's table, some one disapproved of the boy's behaviour. Corbier motioned to him to keep still.

Samuel kept on talking. Above the general noise, bits of sentences, fragments of Bible quotations stood out:

"There are those who shall weep.— They have eyes but they see not.— Verily I say unto you——"

At the meat table, a Protestant argued:

"That doesn't make sense. It is not what enters the body that sullies the soul."

"That's your idea," Boiseriot answered, "but everybody isn't of your faith."

"No," added another Catholic, "a man's a Christian or he isn't.— We have priests to lead us, and all we have to do is follow them. Some folks live like the animals——"

The Protestant shrugged his shoulders and cut off a slice of pork; he had ceased to believe very deeply in anything, so these discussions seemed silly to him. But the reply came like a shot from the Dissenters' table.

"That's it! Just follow the shepherd, even if he leads you to a rotten pasture!— Who lives like the animals?"

Immediately the two sides stared at each other with eyes full of hate, the old men as well as the young. The meal ended in a row. The Dissenter who had spoken shouted to Boiseriot and his companion:

"Will you come outside?"

The women had come running toward the barn and stood at the entrance, trembling with apprehension. Fortunately no one was drunk yet; so it didn't come to anything worse than words, so far.

Trooper was one of the calmest of the lot. He argued quietly:

"The Salvationist is right—he stands up for his ideas. Everybody's free to do as he likes. If he wants to drink water, let him. Wine is both good

and bad. It warms a man, and then it burns him. He says he doesn't want to poison himself; I agree with him!"

While arguing thus, he poured down several bumpers and little by little the wine whipped up his nerves. Madeleine kept her eyes on him, but she did not want to warn him in the presence of the other men. She was watching Michael also, for she knew he was headstrong, very proud, and harsh in religious discussions. He said not a word, because they were at his house, but he was pale and his jaws were set.

"They're sure to come to blows!" said the old serving woman.

And as she was familiar with this sort of scene, she went along between the two tables, calling to this one and that:

"Keep still, you fool!— Eat your meat, there, —and then drink!"

At his end of the table Samuel, with eyes aflame, kept on preaching. He had stood up to make himself better heard, flinging anathemas right and left, mixing up everything: the curse of alcohol and the blood of Christ, Babylon and the distillers.

The old serving woman gripped his hands, holding them down:

"Keep still! you're a bigger fool than the rest of them, do you hear?"

But nothing could stop him; and Gideon, who at

first had laughed at him to the point of tears, being one of those who always laugh at such things, now became angry and threatened to stop the preacher's mouth with his fist. Hadn't he spoken of the looseness of youth, pointing his finger at him and Tien-nette?

At last the engineer, seeing the turn things were taking, hurried out, and an imperious whistle pierced the bedlam.

Suddenly calmed, they went out and followed the machine to Chestnut Hill.

On the little threshing floor at Daru's place, ringed about by the farm buildings, the heat became intolerable. There was not a breath of air; a thick dust settled on the men. Samuel, whose job it was to receive the grain behind the winnowing machine, had disappeared from sight in a cloud of dust.

One of the feeders, a tall, lean youth, fell in a faint; he was carried out into the shade and the feeders whose turn of rest it was threw water in his face.

The work was progressing slowly and in silence now; only that devil of a straw passer kept on singing.

Then Daru made the round with an armful of bottles, shouting:

"Come on, fellows, have some muscadet!"

Behind him came the women with more of the wine. Daru went on:

"Taste it; this isn't dealer's wine! My brother-in-law sends it to me from the Vendée. But go light on it: it's tricky!"

The workers, stupid with the heat, poured down this delightful little white wine as if it were tenth rate claret. Daru took alarm and cautioned the women:

"That's enough, take it away, or they won't finish their work."

The women went away, taking along the half emptied bottles. They passed through the barn where Boiseriot and Trooper, exhausted and black of face, were lolling on the cool earthen floor. Boiseriot tasted the wine.

"Here," said he, "that's the right stuff!"

The women left them a full bottle. Trooper drank and smacked his lips.

"Yes!—it picks a fellow up, this does!"

His head was hot and he laughed with contentment, bottle in hand, instantly rested.

"By golly, Boiseriot! Samuel is a poor specimen of a liar; wine is better than water!— I've a good mind to finish the bottle."

The man looked at him sideways with his guileful eyes:

"Finish the bottle! You're not up to it! It would knock you over."

Trooper fell into the trap; he couldn't pass by such a challenge from a Catholic!

"Go along!" he said, disdainfully, "I'm not a weakling, I could drink ten bottles . . . like this, see!"

He stretched himself flat on his back and, holding the bottle high, let the wine gurgle slowly down his throat.

"Oof! It's gone! Did you see?"

Boiseriot got on his feet. Being called back to the machine just then, they returned to their posts.

The noise had begun again. The straw passers howled boisterously. Others were calling to each other in harsh tones. Two of the older men were having a quarrel: it had started with a religious discussion, and now they were digging up old and buried differences. They hurled insults at each other and would have come to blows if there had been time.

At the feeding shelf Trooper was handling the sheaves with quick movements. The fumes of the wine had begun to muddle his head. He had thrown away his cap; the sun, beating down on his head, finished the confusion of his brain.

The machine stopped, choked off. Trooper had thrown two tangled sheaves into it, at one thrust.

All around mocking laughter arose, and shouts of derision. Trooper, busy cleaning the maws of the thresher, straightened with an oath, ready for a quarrel. Seeing this, the others mocked him only the louder, using their hands as megaphones.

"It's the big one! Booh! Booh!"

Four Catholics called down from above, to egg him on:

"Trooper, you're losing your belt! Trooper, you're wanted in the kitchen! Go and wipe the kids' noses! That's all you're fit for!"

Boiseriot laughed as he pulled out the final fistfuls of straw. At last the threshers began to turn again.

Trooper was white with rage. He had heard some one say, near the winnower: "The little fellow feeds better!" and to his muddled mind this calm statement was a greater insult than the mockery of the men up there, stacking the straw.

"I don't think so: the big one can put it all over him, shoving in the straw."

All around the winnower they were now discussing the work of these two. The discussion soon involved everybody and the old rivalry came to the fore again, the Catholics supporting Boiseriot, the Dissenters Trooper.

The two men, hearing all this, no longer looked at each other. Bent over the feeding shelf, they worked furiously. Boiseriot was the more skilful; he threw out his hands with the agility of a cat. Every one of his thrusts was precise, sent the straw just far enough so it could be caught by the machine. He wasn't even sweating; with his cap drawn over his ears, he did not seem to be at all aware of the heat.

Trooper worked as if he were fighting. Rage dominated him, the drunken rage of his nights of dissipation. The blood had rushed to his head, driving out all his normal instincts, which were gentle and sensible. His jaw set, his eyes wild, he shook all over with an uncontrolled fury against Boiseriot, against the Catholics, against the machine, against the straw, against everything! Throwing his whole weight forward, he swept the shelf with wrathful arms.

"The little fellow feeds better! By golly, I'll show them! Damn them!"

He shouted:

"Bring on the sheaves! Bring 'em on!"

The band cutters pushed the sheaves toward him, and he, with every ounce of his strength, thrust his great arms at the gaping maw——

"Ha-a-a!"

There was a cracking of bones. The engineer jumped wild-eyed to the control lever to stop the machine. All the workers, whether singing or quarrelling, those on the stacks, those on the ladders, those at the sheaves,—all stood stock still, hands raised high, a cry of terror strangled in their throats.

On the hopper shelf lay Trooper, face down; the machine had bitten off one of his arms.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY had taken him to the hospital where they had cut away all that the machine had left of his right arm. When he had recovered consciousness he had said to the doctors:

"You'd have done better to finish me off— You don't think I'm going to go on living like this?"

For three days after, he had led them a terrible dance, yelling savagely and without once stopping:

"I'll kill myself! I'll kill myself!"

But these evil thoughts left him when his temperature came down; now he was a very meek, very gentle patient, who wasn't getting well quickly, however, because his spirits were so crushed. The frightful wound had almost drained him of his blood. He lay there, as white as the sheets, and when he raised his head his blue eyes rolled in their sockets from weakness.

His mother had come to see him, as had his sister Fridoline, and his employer, Rivard. But these first visits had so exhausted him that the doctors had given orders to admit no one else. However, on the second Saturday they let Madeleine pass in and a nurse led her along the corridors whose unbroken whiteness sent a chill through her. Madeleine stepped softly behind the silent nurse and mumbled:

"It's a house of death— Poor big brother, how I wish you were out of here!"

When the nurse had shown her into the patient's room, she felt on the point of fainting. He had quickly drawn up the sheet to hide his mutilated shoulder and his eyes tried to smile at her from out his bloodless face.

She kissed him and for a long moment they looked at each other in silence. Then, in an effort to keep down the wave of feeling that threatened to overcome her, she said:

"I think you're looking fine, considering— You'll soon be all right again, Trooper."

He repeated very gently:

"Sister, call me John. Ever since I was a little shaver I've been called by that boastful nickname because I was so big and strong; but now my strength is gone and it'll never come back. I'm not complaining; it's my own fault."

"Not at all! It isn't your fault. What is to be will be—things are written a long time ahead."

"Yes—you're a good soul. You are the best of them all— If you could stay here I'd get well sooner."

With his left hand, which had grown white and thin, he took one of hers and played with her fingers.

A little colour came into his cheeks; he looked as if he were hunting for the right words to frame a daring request.

"Madeleine, I want to tell you something— I've been waiting for you so impatiently and I'm glad you came just to-day— There's something I want to say to you that I couldn't say to anybody else— Madeleine, at Chantepie there's a girl whom I've loved with all my heart for a long time."

"Violette, the dressmaker? Were you thinking I didn't know it?"

"Yes, Violette—a tall girl, with eyes just the reverse of yours."

Madeleine laughed.

"A pretty girl, then! But you needn't tell me what she's like; I know her. I saw her two years ago, at the Chantepie fair."

He fell back into despondency.

"It's two years to-morrow, as you say—since I spoke to her for the first time. I was to go there again this year, to the fair, and she was to look for me. She loves me a lot, and I know she's worrying herself sick about me now. Madeleine, I want her to know how much I've been thinking of her on my bed of pain."

"But don't you see, I couldn't possibly manage to go to Chantepie, on account of the children at home."

"I've thought of that— I've asked the nurse politely for a sheet of note paper and she gave me one. Here it is."

He hunted under his bolster and handed to Madeleine a pencil and a crumpled envelop.

"Please put it down that she's not to worry—that if I could only know that she's in good health and spirits, it would be balm to my heart."

Madeleine had taken the pencil, but she turned her eyes away so that her brother might not see the pity that had welled up in them.

Poor fellow! How he loved this Catholic girl whom Madeleine and her mother distrusted! She was far from worrying! She hadn't even once inquired about him, and if the accident to her betrothed had given her a shock, she certainly hadn't shown it.

As if this mutilation wasn't enough, nor the wretchedness against which he would now have to struggle all his life long!— On top of all he'd have to carry a heavy heart, too! How difficult life was!

"Poor big brother! You ought not to tire yourself thinking such things . . . Wait a few days—When you're stronger."

But he said with a pleading look:

"No, Madeleine!—right away, please! Here, take this tray to write on, so I can watch you do it."

She placed the paper where he wanted it and began, submitting every sentence to him.

"My dear Violette:

"I cannot write you with my own hand on account of the calamity which has fallen on me. I am having these words set down for me by a serious person from whom we need not fear any gossip. Violette, I have suffered very much, but I have always had you before my eyes, even when it was worst."

"Say that I'm counting on us getting married soon. The Insurance Company will pay me an income—that's what the doctor says—and as soon as I'm on my feet again I'll get a Government job."

"Oh! That's good news," said Madeleine; "I'm right glad. Then I'll put down: 'I think we'll have a-plenty for getting our household things with what——'"

"No! no! don't say that! I don't want you to tell her— Just say that I haven't changed my mind."

So she wrote:

"My intentions toward you are the same, for my heart will never change. If you like, we can be married right soon——"

She added, however:

"—as soon as I am able to earn my own living and yours, which will not be long, you may hope and trust."

They finished the letter with this:

"My dear Violette, I don't want you to grieve on my account. To-morrow is the day of the Chantepie Fair: I want you to go out as usual. If I could know that you were laughing and having a good time with

the other girls of your age, I should be very glad.

"My dear Violette, you can write to me by the name of John Clarandeau, at the hospital. I kiss you in thought as I kissed you the first time, two years ago to-morrow, the day of the Fair at your place. And I sign myself——"

He took the pencil and traced his name labouriously, stopping at each letter. Then his head fell back on the pillow, still paler for the exertion.

Madeleine wrote the address:

"To Mademoiselle,
Mademoiselle Violette Ouvrard,
Dressmaker at Chantepie."

"Put 'personal' so that the postman won't give it to anybody else— That's right . . . Thank you. —Now don't forget to put it in the box right away. —I'm real glad you came to-day!"

The nurse opened the door:

"There's too much talking in here; that's enough for to-day."

"You're right," said Madeleine, "I'm going. I'll come again."

As she went out he called to her again, his whole being in upheaval:

"Don't forget now!—as soon as you're outside——"

Madeleine mailed the poor letter without delay and it got to Chantepie on Sunday morning, as it should.

CHAPTER XV

VIOLETTE was sewing at her mother's house. She was making a waist to wear at the Fair, with the model before her, in a catalogue from Paris.

This year, the city fashion demanded a rather low neckline; and Violette was trying to impose it on the village of Chantepie, where some of the girls were very dressy.

For herself she had chosen an extreme model, cut in a low point in front. Still, she hesitated to cut so boldly into the goods.

The postman opened the door:

"Mademoiselle Violette! 'personal.' A love letter, my pretty!"

She did not reply, merely looking at the curious address, penciled in a strange handwriting.

As soon as the postman had gone she tore the envelope open. At the first lines, something like pity came into her eyes for the handsome young fellow whose love had flattered her vanity and who was now damaged forever.

But it was only a flicker. Behind her red lip a sharp tooth gleamed. Would she go out? Would she go to the Fair with the other girls? Really now,

what a fool he was! It was getting to be ridiculous!

She shook her brown head, bristling with curl papers, and mumbled:

“For one that’s lost—there’ll be two found.”

And as, at the age of twenty, she was experienced in the ways of men and knew full well what bait they liked best, she bent over the basted blouse and, with two strokes of the scissors, cut a deeper V than the one in the catalogue.

CHAPTER XVI

AT the Moulinettes, the accident on threshing day had spread a veil of sadness over everybody. When Madeleine gave news of her brother to the farm folk and the neighbours who came to inquire, a deep pity rang through the words they exchanged.

Even Boiseriot turned pale at such times, and although he had witnessed the accident he disliked to tell about it. But he was too fundamentally evil to have a clean heart about it; his pity was nothing more than a skein of thread tangled all over a thorn bush. Perhaps he felt a vague remorse, or rather the fear of having committed a sin so grievous that no amount of penance could free him of it; in any case there was a sense of satisfied vengeance mingled with the other.

The doctor still encouraged Trooper's hopes about the Insurance Company's payment to him and the Government job he would get when he would be on his feet again. Madeleine never doubted that these promises were on the point of fulfillment and talked freely about it. But Michael struck a note of skepticism—very gently and cautiously, so as not to sadden her prematurely.

"He drank a whole bottle just before going back to the machine.—It's a known fact—and they'll make the most of it. As for a Government job——"

He made a vague motion of the hand, not wishing to speak out before Boiseriot who, being on the priests' side, did not vote for Michael's side at elections.

Madeleine listened, surprised at the unusual gentleness of his manner and speech. She felt instinctively that he talked to her in this way so as to avoid shocking her sorrow, and she was grateful to him for it.

She was grateful, too, for his considerateness, his eagerness to arrange for her trips to the hospital in town. He had said to her:

"Any time you feel like going to see your brother, just go and never mind about the work."

Michael was no longer the moody young master with the hard and restless eyes. His passionate outburst had quite passed over and he talked now like a good, sensible comrade with a calm, even temper.

Madeleine liked him better this way. And in spite of his words that she could not forget, there still lived in her heart a quiet hope that fanned it like a lazy summer breeze following after a devastating storm. Later—who could tell?—the thing she must not even think of for the present might come to pass, bit by bit.

She said to herself:

"And to think that I was going to leave—like a stubborn fool!— If I'd run off like that, right away, without thinking, where would I be now? What would I do without Lalie and Jo? I'm sure I couldn't get used to doing without them."

Her affection for the children had, indeed, grown wonderfully vigilant.

She was fond of her mother, of her sister, of Michael—she was quite overcome by her brother's calamity. On the other hand there were those whom she detested or distrusted. Pictures sweet or sad came to her mind and passed away, following each other like travellers at an inn. But for Lalie and Jo the table was always set. Theirs was the softest, warmest corner, stuffed with fine wool,—and never, never should they leave it!

She herself was amazed at it.

"My darlings, you give me a lot of trouble and yet there's none but you!"

Whether she was in the house with them, or at her washing, or at chapel, her mind was always busy thinking up things for them.

"I'll put a blue ribbon in Lalie's hair . . . She's pale; she's growing too fast; I'll make some rust-water to pick her up. Jo likes to hit me on the head. I'll play with him a quarter of an hour every morning . . . I'll just get up a little earlier."

She wanted them to be as happy as if their

mother were alive. Her love for them made her clever and ingenious. She who could only do coarse knitting had learned a pretty crochet stitch and made for each of them a warm sweater of blue wool, for winter.

On Sundays she dressed Lalie's doll and made whips of braided strips of birchbark for the baby, or else little rush chairs. She also taught Lalie her prayers and the names of the days and counting on her fingers.

The little girl never left her any more than her own shadow. Jo, too, tried his best to follow her around; if she left him behind in the barnyard or in the garden, he caught up with her on the doorstep and jumped at her skirts with a yell that he meant to scare her.

He was a little slow in learning to talk. He was always trying to say everything at once and when he came to a difficult word, he got all mixed up, either bursting out laughing or stamping his feet in a temper, just as he happened to feel.

He could say 'papa' and 'Lalie,' but 'Madeleine' was too long for him even to attempt. But one day he began to call out: "Nêne—Nêne—Nêne!"

Madeleine lifted him to the height of her face in a burst of gladness. And then, all at once, a thought came to her; a cruel thought that drove the blood from her heart. Nêne! It was indeed the abbrevia-

tion of her name, but it was also an abbreviation of another name to which she was not entitled.

At Chantepie as at Saint-Ambroise and all about, "Nêne" was short for *marraine*, or godmother. It was the everyday word, used by young and old alike.

Jo's real 'Nêne' was Georgette, Michael's sister-in-law, whose name was never mentioned in the house and whose place Madeleine had taken.

"Nêne! Nêne!"

The name stirred Madeleine as did that other name that was too sweet and forbidden. It gave her the same rapture, and she hugged the child to her breast passionately.

"I don't know, my baby Jo, if I ought to let you say that."

That very evening she spoke to old Corbier, not daring to speak about it to Michael.

"There's something on my mind—it's about the baby. He's calling me 'Nêne,' the darling. . . . I don't know if you'll like it, nor his father either. . . . If you don't maybe I can make him say my name some other way."

She was sitting in a dark corner and the old man could not see her anxious face nor her eyes brimming with tears; but he felt the quaver in her voice and answered soothingly:

"You're worrying over a trifle, my dear girl. What does it matter whether you're 'Nêne' or 'Madeleine'? If you are good to him that's all that

matters, and when he's grown he'll know how you took the place of the other two."

"That's my highest hope—I'm not asking for more!" she said, and ran away.

From that day on she was Nêne for Jo, and for Lalie too.

All day long the name rang out, and it brought a breath of sweetness into the house. The baby lips gave it a caressing sound, like the twitter of a bird. They called it out in joy as in trouble. It grew to be the last resort and appeal to a protector who was infinitely strong and infinitely kind.

Michael had made no objection; he even fell into saying, when Lalie pestered him with questions:

"Don't bother me; ask Nêne."

For this Madeleine forgave him quite all of his past harshness.

She felt that she wasn't treated as a servant, humble girl that she was, used to hiring out her arms here and there, as need befell, among the tillers of the soil. By the grace of the children she had become the active soul of the house, the one who watched and held all together.

Michael no longer thought of protesting. Though the picture of Marguerite was always within him, alive and unconquered, another picture was there too now, and growing from day to day, so that he felt himself held in a grip that was at once firm and gentle.

Winter had come with its long, empty evenings. Boiseriot went to bed early, and Gideon was gadding about at the young people's parties in the villages round about.

Old man Corbier went to sleep in his arm chair right after supper, so that Michael was left to sit up alone with his housekeeper.

His physical agitation had quieted down and those bad dreams were no more troubling him. He looked with calmness at Madeleine as she sat sewing under the lamp, with the light full on the blonde nape of her neck. Sometimes she worked away at the spinning wheel, after lowering the lamp, for economy. They talked very little; no sound but the hum of the spindle. Now and then Madeleine got up and tip-toed to the cradle. And in a minute the wheel was turning again.

Michael thought:

"Women, nowadays, whether mistress or maid, don't find time for spinning. Maybe they don't want to. They aren't brave as they used to be; my father says they aren't, and so do the other old fellows. That's their way of getting back at the young ones, but perhaps they are right, all the same. A thrifty woman means a good deal to a household—everything to mine. She's like a spring shower on a dry meadow. If my house had remained disorganised as it was, before long my children would have gone to ruin. I must consider them. . . . They're

as sheltered as chicks in a warming pan. . . . It's got to keep on like this. Life isn't just the pleasures of youth. I'm past thirty; and that's the age of reason.

"If I were to make up my mind, it wouldn't be anything like the first time. Then I was twenty-four and the world shone like a lighted chapel . . . Now all the candles are out!— Still, a man must go trudging on. You can't always have a brush fire to warm your hands by—a little heap of embers helps to pass the evening. If I were to make up my mind I might be doing a right and sensible thing."

CHAPTER XVII

AT Christmas Boiseriot went to confession. He went to the parish priest at St.-Ambroise who was known to lead in the fight against the Dissenters. After confessing the ordinary trifles, he came to the things that really mattered; but, for prudence, he poured them all out in a bunch, very quickly, without details. The priest did not press him.

He wasn't a bad man, this parish priest,—but overzealous and too eager to bring back to the fold all these Dissenters who were, after all, only the very best strayed sheep.

His penitent, who accused himself of wanting to marry a Dissenter—for he was careful to say “marry”—did not seem to him very guilty. It might mean another one won over, another one to be baptised solemnly, one Sunday in the month of Mary. As for having been a little quarrelsome, for the glory of the Church, on threshing day, and having wished evil on one of her detractors, that showed hotheadedness, no doubt, but also a fine, firm faith.

So Boiseriot left the confessional all straightened out, and went back to the Moulinettes as happy as a first communicant.

Madeleine had also gone to St.-Ambroise that day

She had brought back, for Lalie and Jo, a couple of oranges and a loaf of baker's bread. Coming in, Boiseriot saw the basket standing open on the table; impudently, he cornered Madeleine in the hall:

"Stupid, save your pennies, anyhow! You could buy a whole bushel of oranges and a bagful of short-bread for his kids,—that wouldn't get him to make you the real mistress of the house in the eyes of the world!— Listen! If you'd only——"

She cut him short by pushing him out of doors. But he came back to his point on the following days. He found ways of cornering her in the barn, in the lean-to, even in the house; and more than once she was thankful for being so strong that she had nothing to fear from a weakling like him.

One Sunday in January he met her on the road to St.-Ambroise and walked along with her. The road was straight and dotted with people on their way to mass or to rosary prayers. She did not want to push him out of her way in sight of so many neighbours and therefore had to listen to his vile proposals and his threats. She'd yield to him or he'd set all the young fellows of the countryside on her—and who'd defend her now that her brother was crippled?

As soon as they were out of sight of the others along the road, she drove him away, throwing stones at him.

From that day on he cooked up his revenge.

He thought Gideon would be a perfect tool for his evil work and he began moulding the boy's mind to his purpose, furbishing it, whetting it like a pruning hook.

Gideon, like himself, was hired up to the first of March. Boiseriot had agreed to stay on another year, but the boy had not yet renewed his contract with Corbier and likely he'd be leaving in a few weeks. He wanted a hundred francs increase for the coming year and Michael was not disposed to give him as much as that. Gideon was neither very handy nor, above all, very biddable. While he did what he was told to do, he was never in a hurry about it and his first impulse was to do the reverse of what he was told. Moreover, while he wasn't exactly lazy, still he lost a lot of time dawdling, his youthful mind finding a thousand things of interest by the wayside.

Boiseriot began to rouse him against Michael in a round-about way, so the boy wouldn't see his purpose.

When Michael grumbled because some piece of work was badly done, Boiseriot would say to Gideon:

"Let him' do it himself—he'll see if it is easy!" or "Aren't you getting sick of it yet? For my part, I've never let anybody pester me about the way I do my work.— You don't like it? All right! Good-

bye!— If I were you I'd get out of here the minute my time was up."

Gideon had received many a worse scolding without bearing Corbier any grudge for it; but, feeling the lash of the whip, he burst out:

"Gosh darn it! sure, I'm going to get out! And I'll be jiggered if I'm ever sorry I quit!"

Boiseriot nodded approvingly:

"And it's saying no more than the truth, poor boy—he's led you a pretty rotten life!"

When he was satisfied that Gideon had quite made up his mind to leave, he began to talk about Madeleine.

"With Lent coming, when the beasts are better fed than the men, it's a good idea to change cooks. This one here, she eats the pork and leaves us the cabbage."

He made the boy laugh with funny remarks about her. With that big bosom of hers, she must have smothered all her lovers . . .

"No . . . not all, though! . . . She's still got one left . . ."

"And who's that?" asked the boy, turning from his work the better to listen.

"Well, now . . . I guess you're too young to hear such things."

Between his teeth he added, pretending to be scandalised:

"It's a shame and a disgrace . . . such goings-on! . . ."

But Gideon couldn't be set against Madeleine so easily, for several reasons.

When Boiseriot at last spat out the worst of his insinuations, the lad protested loudly:

"No! That isn't true! You're trying to be funny!"

"It isn't just hearsay— I've seen it myself, I tell you!"

It took him several days to convince the boy. Finally, one afternoon, Boiseriot thought he had him where he wanted him.

They had been hard at work all day and, this being a fast day, the soup was very thin. Moreover, Michael had stormed at Gideon while they were at table. When the two farm-hands went back to their work of cutting down a thorny hedge, Gideon began to voice his resentment more loudly than usual.

Boiseriot let him go on and then launched his scheme. First he recounted everything, Corbier's reprimands, the long weeks of Lenten fasting, the sinful goings-on in the house,—ending up, with a laugh:

"Really now—they deserve to have the neighbours sicced on them!"

"I'm for it, damn it all! I'm game if you are."

The boy's words were mere bravado; but the man took him up instantly:

"Oh, I'm too old for that kind of fun."

That put Gideon, who was by no means slow-witted, on his guard. Boiseriot continued in a low voice, without looking up:

"Besides, I'm going to stay here while you're going away in ten days or so. All you need to do is tell the boys of your age what's going on here; they'll jump at the chance of having some fun, now that the season for your evening parties is over. When I was your age I took part in a great mobbing once. That was at Chantepie: a cobbler who'd played truant with another man's wife. Ten or twelve of us got around to his door every evening and raised a devil of a racket with old kettles, tin pans, buckets, anything. We forced him out of the neighborhood, all right! I never laughed so much in my life!—Everybody was on our side. It'll be just the same here. It's wrong to let such doings pass without punishment, and it's up to you young fellows to stop them."

Gideon shook his head:

"No, no,—it's none of my business. Besides, there's the family to think of——"

"What family? The Clarandeaus? Fine family that is! Don't you know anything at all? The youngest girl who was here for the threshing last year—haven't you heard what's being said?—She's even worse than her sister here, though she's nothing but a kid in years——"

Gideon, who had been hacking away at a hawthorn with his pruning-hook, stopped stock still:

"That's a lie!"

So anxious was Boiseriot to clinch the matter that he took no notice of the boy's angry tone and gesture, but went on:

"A lie? Ask the boys at St.-Ambroise who trailed her into the Beaufrêne woods, a week ago last Sunday——"

"What's that you say, Boiseriot? Just you say that again——"

Carried away by the flood of his hate, Boiseriot could not stop.

"Yes, in the Beaufrêne woods!—and again last Sunday, at the same place, there were four of them with her!— Hey, there! what's come over you, idiot?"

For Gideon had thrown away his pruning-hook and jumped at him.

"You damn cur, you! I'll teach you to invent such lies! Tiennette, eh?— Both those Sundays, after prayers, she went a little way out on the Valley road and sat down by the roadside, and I was there with her, if you want to know!"

Boiseriot tried to get away, but Gideon pushed him backward into the hedge. Holding him down with one hand, he belaboured him with the other, on which he was wearing a heavy leather glove; all the while yelling, with tears of wrath:

"Take that—and that!— So much for your dirty lies!— Is that so? Tiennettee was in the Beaufrêne woods, was she, you filthy liar? The master lives in sin with his housekeeper, does he?— And what's that to you? Take that, you liar!— I'm to sic the boys on them, am I?— I'll sic them on you!—damn your filthy hide!"

When they scrambled to their feet again, Michael was standing behind them. He said:

"Well, are you through?" and to Boiseriot he added: "Come up to the house, you!"

Boiseriot made a gesture of rage, but Michael went on:

"March ahead of me—right now!"

His tone was so cutting that Boiseriot obeyed, for fear of another trouncing.

When he had been paid off and had packed his belongings, he left the farm-hands' lean-to and snooped back toward the house. Seeing that Michael had gone out, he went up to the threshold and hissed between clenched teeth:

"I'm going— Good-bye!— You've bitten me, but I'll rend your flesh!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE pond of the Moulinettes was to be cleared that year. According to the terms of the land lease, the water was drawn off every third year and the fish sold. Half of the profits went to the farmer, the other half to the owner, who was likewise entitled to a fine of six carp, to be chosen, of course, from among the largest.

On Shrove Monday the sluice weir was opened. The water ran out through a cemented vent at the base of a high embankment and flowed in a small stream to spread itself over the meadows below. By Monday evening the water had not gone down much, but by Tuesday morning a ring of mud had become visible and the fish that lived around the edge of the pond were swimming about nervously and beating the water frantically with their tails.

On Wednesday morning they began to catch the fish. At peep of dawn a caterer from Saint-Ambroise arrived at the pond with his paraphernalia.

Soon after him the youngsters of the neighbourhood began to come; first two, then another two, then ten or twelve, until there were some thirty of them, boys and girls, all bundled up any old way, and their noses red from the morning chill.

The fish were coming out now. The flow of the water carried them into the "pan," a small, shallow reservoir that was barred at the outlet by a rather fine wire netting. The first to reach the "pan" were white bait; they came on quickly in big schools, and no sooner were they in the already troubled waters of the "pan" than they seemed to realise that they had taken the wrong way and bent all their efforts on dashing back through the water gate. But the strong current carried them down and they began to dart about desperately. After them came the roach, then the bream. The "pan" was wonderfully alive and a-stir. Innumerable little brown streaks cut the surface and from time to time a big bream would come up from the bottom and, making a sharp turn, show as wide and bright as a pewter platter.

At nine o'clock they started catching. Gideon and Alexis, the new hand, had big nets. Standing on the brink of the "pan," they kept plunging them in and heaving them up, while a man behind them took the fish they brought up and dumped them into some water-filled holes in the ground that had been fixed up to receive them.

Never had the catch been so plenteous; even Michael was astonished. The reason was, probably, that they had succeeded in getting out all the pike at the last draining.

The youngsters that were hanging over the wire netting shouted: "There's some of 'em getting

away! The little ones slip through." Or again "Hey, boss! Didn't you see? There were two of 'em jumped right out of the net. And there's a dead one, floating."

When a fine bream leaped out of Gideon's net and plunged into the water beyond the wire, a fat, red-faced boy of ten made up his mind all at once, shouting:

"Wait a minute! I'll show you!"

He got hold of a basket, rolled up his trouser legs and jumped into the stream. At the first sweep he caught the bream and half a dozen white bait.

"Good boy!" cried Michael; "here, catch!"

Across the wire he emptied the last of a netful—some ten or twelve white bait that dropped into the water like sparks from a rocket.

Then another lad got into the game, and still another, and all of them, or almost all. Every once in a while Michael threw them some fish and they waded about with much shouting, struggling with their baskets and battling for the best positions.

One little fellow, who had been pushed back, was in the water to his belly and shivering with cold; he was going to climb out in despair, when he caught an enormous bream. Scrambling out, he threw it on the grass like a quoit.

"How are you going to carry it?" asked Michael.

"Inside my shirt! I've got some more—see?"

He opened his shirt and showed two white bait

and three or four heads of roach that he had snatched through the wire. Slipping the bream over his stomach, he added: "It's like a pancake, only it isn't hot!"

From the road by the pond a woman called:
"Fédéri!"

It cut the boy's breath short:

"Oh, the devil! There's Mamma!"

The mothers were, in fact, coming down, bringing sandwiches and clean jumpers and neckties; for the boys had run off as soon as they were out of bed, without taking the trouble of eating breakfast or dressing themselves up.

When they got sight of their youngsters, there was a chorus of recrimination, but all the children were so absorbed in their fun that they paid no attention; they just stuck, resigned to a future boxing of ears.

About eleven o'clock the real "gallery" came along.

The first one was a big fellow with a red face, whose coming surprised no one. He had been nicknamed "the Otter," because he came to every pond draining, sometimes walking over ten miles to it, just to eat fresh fish.

But how he did eat! He was such an extraordinary glutton that the people round about were proud of his prowess. He stayed at table for six hours at a stretch, without speaking, without once turning

his head, without even stirring the tip of his toes—just eating, eating, eating.

Lots of people would sit down opposite him, just to see him do away with the fish. The ordinary gluttons hadn't a patch on him when it came to eating fish. He could outsit four or five relays of them.

He came straight to the "pan" and enquired:

"Are the tench out yet?"

"Not yet," answered Michael, "they are just beginning to come."

"So much the better."

Without delay he carried the news to the caterer.

"There are tench coming out . . . You'd better keep an eye on them!"

The man was all smiles and courtesy:

"I'll get them! . . . But first of all, let me find you a nice place at table . . . Here, won't you take this one, right in the centre? . . . that's where the platter is put. And listen: you know what's real eating, you do . . . you give the others an appetite . . . I'll let you have all you can eat . . . for nothing, you understand! All I ask you is to eat, eat, eat!"

"I'll do my best," the Otter replied with an honest look.

He had hardly sat down when three villagers from Saint-Ambroise settled themselves across the table from him and ordered a panful of small fry.

The crowd on the embankment was thickening.

All the young people of the countryside were there. It was like at the first fair of the year. Fish dealers had come out and carried off the smaller fish and farmers' wives had to hurry to get a panful cheap.

Michael acted as auctioneer. He didn't weigh the fish but sold them by the bulk. The women crowded about and tried all kinds of ways to be served before their turn. An old woman, among the last to arrive, sneaked up to the front and when Michael brought out a fine lot she pushed aside the baskets of her neighbours and held out her own with the lid open, saying:

"Here! put it here, darlin'!"

And the boys on the embankment took up the name and laughed as they cried out:

"Darlin'! Darlin'! put it here, darlin'!"

Michael raised his head. Just above him was a group of girls and one of them, tall and very pretty, with flashing teeth, was looking at him boldly.

"Darlin'! Darlin'!"

He was ashamed of being so badly dressed.

Now the pond was nearly empty. There remained nothing but a big black basin, fifteen acres of mud through which wound a stream of shiny water. The big fish were coming out, enormous carp that had to be taken one at a time. The two farm-hands had got into the "pan" where they were paddling about, with mud to their ears, but enjoying their unusual occupation.

The eels were beginning to slip through the mouth of the sluice, one after the other; but they shot right down into the mud, and catch them there if you can! Anyway, the biggest of them remained in the basin; you could see some enormous fellows lying in the mud almost anywhere. There must be some very old ones among them that had never been caught in previous drainings.

The watchers pointed out a huge one lying not very far from the edge, and one of the boys boasted:

"I could get him all right!"

When someone dared him, he made a bet.

"If you get him," said Michael, "you can keep him, and I'll give you a franc piece to boot."

So the lad got out of his clothes, slipped on an old pair of trousers and waded into the mud. Very soon he was in up to his waist; and, as he wouldn't turn back, egged on by the laughing crowd, he finally fell flat on his belly, unable to scramble up again.

The girls started teasing him:

"Turn to the right! . . . Turn to the left! . . . He's caught like a fly in a jug of cream!"

They had to throw a rope to him and drag him back over the mud like a log. He ran down the meadow to wash up in the stream, with all the youngsters trailing him.

"Here's a photographer!"

The shout rallied everybody instantly. There was a man coming on a tandem bicycle with a lady who

was wearing a hat. He set up his camera and tripod in the meadow, took a peep under his black cloth, made signs that he wanted to speak, and the crowd hushed.

"Would you like me to take a picture?"

"Yes! yes! go ahead!"

"Well, then, you'll have to group yourselves a little: some of you up on the embankment and others lower in the meadow, behind the fish catchers."

They formed groups in a flurry of excitement and held their poses. But they didn't suit the photographer, who came to arrange the groups himself.

"Here, you! Come here, little fellow, get to the front. Now, don't anybody move!"

They were too closely huddled; so the photographer spaced them deftly, like a man sorting apples.

"We don't want to be in it," said Michael.

"Oh yes, you do, my good man—just as you are; I'll send you a copy or two."

"All the same, we're ashamed," said Michael. "We're too dirty to be taken right in the front of a picture of all these fine folk."

He turned to look at the people behind him. There were some hundred of them, all standing stiff and trying to look pleasant. The mothers' eyes searched about for their children in the forefront. The young girls were hanging on the arms of the young men as the photographer had paired them,

according to size and dress, without bothering which fellow was courting which girl. But nobody dared to protest for fear of making the whole thing go wrong.

Standing in front of the rest, about three steps behind him, Michael saw the fine-looking girl who had looked at him so boldly a few minutes before. The photographer had linked her arm in that of the baker from Saint-Ambroise, but she had calmly withdrawn it and placed herself where she wanted, right in the foreground.

She was tall, with narrow lips and a rounded bosom. Her face showed milky white under her black hair; but her eyes were her most remarkable feature, very large and very black, but full of light and fire, as sparkling as the stars in a clear winter night.

Michael felt the blood surging through his veins.

"I'll be a blot in the picture, standing so near you, Mademoiselle. You ought to be beside one of those fellows who're dressed up in their Sunday clothes."

She answered with frank directness:

"I don't agree with you. You are at work: it'll show plain enough in the picture!"

She added with a sidewise glance through her long lashes:

"You're lucky he told you he'd give you some pictures—I wish I could get one!"

"All ready!" called the photographer. "Everybody stand still now!"

She looked up and, with a quick movement, threw back her shawl; through the sheer net of her waist her bosom showed very white.

The photographer raised his hand.

"Now, I'll count. One!"

Michael had hardly time to turn his head to face the camera.

"Two—three! Thank you."

There was clearing of throats and laughter, and the youngsters returned to their gambols.

Michael turned around at once, but the girl was already off. He wanted to go after her, but then he did not dare. With his eyes he followed her lithe figure wending its way through the crowd of rather heavy-built peasants dressed in old-fashioned finery. At a little distance, at the top of the incline, she stopped; her glance fluttered back across the meadow, and meeting Michael's eye, she gave him a long, smiling look. Then, right away, she passed over the embankment and vanished.

Michael grew impatient. There remained only two or three purchasers who bothered him with demands for this kind of fish rather than that, or complained that they were being robbed, and weren't they free to bargain if they liked!

"Certainly! Certainly you're free—and so am I!"

He flung down the fish he was holding:

"You'll have to wait a while for me; I'm going up to the house."

He washed his hands and, leaving Gideon to watch the fish, he walked away. The embankment and the lane to the farm buildings were crowded with merry-makers, but the girl he was looking for was not among them. He retraced his steps, walked down through the meadow, and once more turned back to the house. The caterer had set up his tables in the barn; there was a crowd at the door. Michael went to look inside, but there was only "the Otter" eating his tench in the midst of half-drunk young fellows. He shrugged his shoulders in disgust and turned on his heel.

Where could she be?

On his way back to the pond he saw her coming toward him. She was alone, walking slowly, rolling her hips, so absorbed in thought that she started when he spoke to her:

"Has your young man deserted you that I find you walking all by yourself?"

"Oh! You startled me . . . I didn't see you."

He repeated his question foolishly:

"Has your young man deserted you?"

"I have no young man."

"That's too bad!"

She looked at him with head bent down a little,

and her eyes were soft as velvet between the half-closed lashes.

"You're not from these parts, are you? I've never met you anywhere."

Instead of answering she questioned back:

"And you, are you the son of the house?"

"I'm the son of the house and the master too. That's why you saw me haggling with the farmers' wives, and that's why I'm wearing wooden shoes and my work clothes."

She looked at him steadily, playing with her shawl. He went on:

"I've spoken to the photographer—he told me again he'd try to send me two pictures. I'm glad I happened across you, because I wanted to tell you that there'll be one for you."

"It'll be a nice remembrance. Thanks!"

"You're entitled to one. If the picture is pretty to look at, it'll be because you're in it."

She raised her shoulders a little so that the shawl slipped down, and began to smile.

"You know how to pay compliments."

"I say as I think. It'll be a gift to the belle of the party, and I'll not lose by it, since he is sending me two. But I'll have to ask you where you live and who you are."

She paused a moment, then:

"Oh, you'll find out if you want to! But what if you get only one picture?"

The shawl had slipped quite down, uncovering her handsome shoulders and shapely throat. A heady scent enfolded Michael and his ears rang like Easter bells.

"If he should send you just one, you'd be in a fix—— Would you give it up—for me?"

"I'd be only too glad!— But won't you tell me your name?"

She drew herself up very close to him, her shining eyes darting fire:

"I hope he'll send just one," she said and ran away.

From the barn a man was calling Michael. He was a young mason of Saint-Ambroise who wanted to pay him a small sum he owed. They sat down at a table with two other villagers. The mason had been drinking; in a loud voice and with great show of affection he recalled to Michael the good old days when they were schoolboys together. After a while he interrupted himself, saying reproachfully:

"Hey there, darn you! you aren't even listening!"

Michael flushed hotly:

"I was . . . watching 'the Otter.' "

The mason, who was now quite befuddled, shouted:

"Hey there, Otter! Nice little Otter! Is your gullet in working order?"

The guzzler raised his purple face a little from the

table and answered simply, without pride or malice:

"It's getting there, thank you. The bit I've swallowed so far has widened the gap. Pretty soon I'll have worked up an appetite."

Everyone in hearing exclaimed at this, and even Michael couldn't help but laugh.

"He's a bearcat!"

"He must have eaten ten pounds already!"

"Ten! . . . Better say fifteen! And not a bite of bread!"

He had been at it for fully four hours, and during that time more than a hundred people had come to sit around him, nibble a bit of white bait and shove the rest of their platefuls over to him.

There were still about twenty men around him, young farm-hands and villagers who had wagered they would make him stop or choke. They all threw their fishbones under the table, where he, too, was disposing of his. They made a heap high enough to bury their wooden shoes.

The caterer had told the cook:

"Go light on the butter but heavy on the pepper."

The stratagem worked. A fifteen-gallon barrel of wine was set on the table and emptied in no time, regardless of expense, while eyes grew round, palates hot and tempers high.

The mason, who had forgotten all about the payment he wanted to make to Michael, started to sing

with them and Michael hurried away. He wanted to be alone and give himself up to his thoughts.

It was getting toward evening; the pond party was over. He went to his room, and it was only then the thought struck him that he ought to have asked Madeleine to bring the children down and pose in the group picture.

However, it soon passed out of his mind again. From his window he watched the crowd going home to Saint-Ambroise or Chantepie and said to himself:

“And I don’t even know which way she went.”

CHAPTER XIX

HER coming again, on the following Saturday, was like a great burst of light before his eyes. Such a gust of youth swelled his breast that for a moment he felt faint.

He was in the meadow, near the water-holes where the fish were kept; she was alone, coming along the road from Saint-Ambroise with a basket over her arm. When she reached the embankment she made him a pretty curtsy and strolled down toward him, listlessly, her shoulders swaying as if poised for a dance.

"Good evening, Monsieur Corbier! I passed by to see if you still had some fish to sell. Are there any nice ones left?"

He did not hear what she said, his thoughts in a turmoil.

"Tell me your name, since you know mine. The other day you ran off without telling me."

"My name? Don't you sell fish to people unless you know their names? My name is Violette, and I'm a dressmaker at Chantepie."

"Violette, you're the prettiest dressmaker in all the world!"

She gave a low laugh, with her head thrown back a little, like a strutting pigeon.

He went on, pointing to the road:

"You say you are from Chantepie, but you came from the other direction——"

"That's because I've got two new customers at Saint-Ambroise. I went there Wednesday evening; now my work is done and I'm on my way home. Passing by your place, I thought I'd buy some fish for mamma, who isn't very well."

She drawled the last words sweetly and sadly and it gladdened Michael's heart to find that she was as good as she was beautiful. He spoke quickly:

"There are very few fish left; every day people from all around have been coming for some. But here are some tench, and here a few bream; and oh, yes, here are the carp, but they're the landlord's fine and I can't sell them."

She seemed annoyed at that and muttered:

"I'm sorry, I'd have bought one."

Immediately he plunged his net into the water-hole and brought up two enormous carp.

"Pick out the best of them. I'd rather give it to you than to the landlord.— He'll have to be satisfied with the remaining five."

Seeing him bent over the net, she laughed silently in triumph; then she exclaimed:

"What big fellows! I'd have never thought they were as big as that! Thank you, but I don't want it. My basket is too small, and besides it would be too heavy for me to carry all the way to Chantepie."

Michael threw the carp back into the water and selected the best of the tench, filling her basket, and when she offered to pay for it, he refused indignantly.

"Not at all! You'd hurt me dreadfully!"

Her fine black eyes moved lazily under the caressing lids.

"Monsieur Corbier, I appreciate this very much and I won't forget it—but you'll know nothing about it because you never come to Chantepie. It may be ten years before we see each other again."

He took her up quickly:

"Ten years! I hope not! If you'd said ten days, I'd have still found it too long——"

As he had come close to her and spoken very low, she stepped back and broke in on his speech:

"Oh,—who is that woman up there at your house? Your hired girl, I suppose?"

Away up near the house Madeleine was just then heard calling Lalie.

"Yes," said Michael. "She's my housekeeper."

"Oh!— And Lalie, who's she?"

"She's my little girl; she's five years old." After a moment's hesitation, he added: "She has a little brother who's younger. I'm a widower."

"I know. I've heard all about it. She's a Claran-deau, isn't she—your hired girl?"

"Yes, the sister of a young fellow who lost his arm last year at the threshing."

"Wait a minute—I believe I know her.— A big woman, with pockmarks on her face—still, not too terribly homely,—isn't she?"

She looked at him squarely and boldly:

"Am I right? A girl of about your own age—and not exactly homely?"

There was a trace of annoyance in his answer:

"What do I know? Why don't you listen to me?"

"Because I'm in a hurry. Thank you very much, and now I'll say good-bye, hoping you'll give me a chance to repay you some time for your kindness."

She turned on her heel, flicking her skirts, and nimbly ran up the meadow slope and back to the road.

When she had gone a little way she halted for a minute. Her basket was heavy; she set it down and lifted the lid; it was so full that some of the fish were spilled on the road.

An insolent smile passed over her face; it still remained beautiful, but the lines of it were quite changed. Her sharp teeth glittered as if made to bite into living, bleeding flesh, like the teeth of a wild animal. The red, curled lip showed cruel wile and perhaps also a little contempt for the too easy prey.

"Oh—men! One more I can twist round my little finger. If he doesn't come to-morrow, he'll

come running in a week. I'll have to manage to be alone."

Back at the pond, Michael stood, all reason swept from his brain, following her with his eyes as far as he could, drinking in exultantly the strong spring air that was still charged with the fragrance of her.

"My youth is not gone, since the loveliest of them all does not repulse me!"

Leaning motionless and wide eyed against the railing of the pond, he stood lost in dreams of a marvellous adventure.

CHAPTER XX

SHORTLY before Easter, old man Corbier died. One evening, as he was going to bed, he felt ill. Right away he lost consciousness, and the next morning at cock crow he passed away.

Madeleine took the children to the neighbours at Chestnut Hill and Gideon made the rounds, carrying the news to family, friends and neighbours, all the Dissenters.

The praying women began to come as early as eight o'clock. The first of them came from the nearby hamlets. Then came those from the outlying farmsteads and at last those from Le Coudray who stayed for the wake. The next day there were many of them: from Saint-Ambroise, from Château-Blanc, from all the villages round about wherever there was a family of Dissenters.

As they came into the house they went down on their knees silently, in a circle around the one who recited the prayers. When one of the group rose to go away, another immediately took her place.

The funeral took place on the third day, at Saint-Ambroise, in the Dissenters' burial ground. Prayers—prayers—prayers! Prayers on the way between the flowering hedges; prayers in the gloomy chapel;

long prayers at the burial grounds while the coffin was set on the flat stone over the grave of the last priest; prayers again when the coffin was lowered into the grave and the handfuls of earth thrown on it.

Neither Catholics nor Protestants had come, but all the Dissenters' families had sent someone. The poor soul going away alone, without viaticum, should at least have all the prayers of those near him to speed him on his way.

After the burial, Madeleine passed by Chestnut Hill to fetch the children. When she reached the Moulinettes, she found the family gathered there: two brothers-in-law of Michael, his uncle, several cousins and also his parents-in-law with Georgette, his sister-in-law, who had come too, brazenly.

All these people were discussing family affairs; when Madeleine entered, they fell silent, and the looks of some were hostile. So she left her mourning hood and went out into the garden with a troubled heart because, all at once, she had felt herself a stranger. She went to the barn and, passing to the lean-to of the hands, she began to arrange things so that Gideon could come to sleep in the master's room that evening.

As she came back, she saw that Georgette had seated herself on a bench by the doorway, with Jo on her lap. She was playing with him, teasing him, tossing him up and then cradling him in her arms.

Madeleine came up to them, smitten with jealousy. The little tot held out his arms to her, calling: "Nêne! Nêne!" But Georgette said pointedly:

"I'm your Nêne, darling. Kiss your Nêne! You must not call that girl 'Nêne!'"

In a flash Madeleine was upon her, bristling with anger; without a word she tore away the other woman's hands and, holding the baby close to her bosom, she went into the house.

CHAPTER XXI

ON Violette's name day Boiseriot presented himself at Chantepie with a little gift box that held a silver thimble and a pair of scissors. Violette was politely pleased, and her mother kept Boiseriot to lunch.

When Vespers rang, the mother went to church, leaving the two by themselves.

Violette played with the scissors, saying:

"They're pretty. I'll take good care of them."

While inwardly she thought:

"They're just tin. The whole thing didn't cost him more than thirty sous. But why did he do it? What's struck him, this year?"

Boiseriot laughed like a man who is happy to be alive.

"When you get married I'll give you a handsome present, don't you fear! Your godfather isn't rich, but he's all alone, living like an old wolf. He could manage to buy you a gold necklace,—or give you a dozen gold pieces for your wedding."

"I haven't any sweetheart."

"Better go and get you one, little girl."

They were silent for a moment, and then they talked about the weather and Violette's new cus-

tomers. She lifted innocent eyes to him, but all her guile and craft were on the alert.

"By and by he'll have to stop beating about the bush," she thought. "I wonder what's on his mind?"

Finally he ask in an offhand way:

"Did you go to the Moulinettes for the pond-draining?"

"Yes, and I'm not sorry I did. You yourself put it into my head to go. Thank you for having told me."

"Did they get much fish?"

"Quite a lot. I bought some from the man you told me about."

"Michael Corbier?"

"Yes. A handsome man and well-spoken! You had a row with him. I'm sure you were in the wrong."

He answered smoothly:

"Perhaps I was. I'm an impulsive fellow; we had some words about the farm work—but I'm not holding any grudge against him."

"I believe you," said Violette with a show of conviction.

"I'd even like him to know it. I shouldn't have minded meeting him here, that time he called."

He was watching her slyly with sharp eyes. She thought of parrying the thrust, but then decided to

give herself the satisfaction of showing him that he wasn't taking her in.

"Go on!" she said. "Why don't you admit that you know nothing and would like to know all? Don't think I'm a fool! It's true, Michael Corbier did call, but he doesn't want anybody to know about it. I'm telling you, because you are my godfather."

Boiseriot laughed.

"That's good!— That's fine! You haven't lost your time! But you know he has two kids. Besides, he's a Dissenter. What's your idea?"

She waved her hand with an air of perfect unconcern and answered, this time quite frankly:

"I don't know." Then she added: "And you?— What's your idea about it?"

"I don't know either, my dear. And what's more, it doesn't concern me."

She insisted coaxingly:

"Oh, but it does! I'll tell you all that happens—and I'll come to you for advice."

"We'll see about that! . . . After all, I'm not against this thing."

He spoke calmly, but his eyes gleamed with malicious pleasure. He went on smoothly:

"Didn't I hear somewhere last Summer that there was a Dissenter from Saint-Ambroise going with you?—a big fellow they call Trooper, who lost his arm in the threshing machine?"

"People did some talking, yes—but they don't

any more. I haven't seen him since his accident."

"I'd say you were wise. It's not a nice family—people of no standing. . . . His sister happens to be Corbier's hired girl; she isn't of much account—and yet, there are things being said——"

Violette looked at him so keenly that he put off to some later day the telling of what he wanted her to hear. Having finished his coffee, he left her.

On his way home, he felt like dancing.

"I've got them! I've got them, every one!—Corbier, Madeleine, Trooper—and I'll get Gideon too. The girl's a bad one—not so clever, either—not nearly so clever as she thinks!— Ah, I've got you! You're no match for me!"

Violette had remained on the threshold, following him with her eyes, amused at seeing him so frisky.

"There he goes, thinking I'll keep him informed and ask his advice! He's got some grudge against them, the little sneak! But that's nothing to me. I'll have some fun and hang the rest! Michael is a handsome fellow; his eyes are blacker than mine. . . . I kind of liked Trooper too—last year. . . . And the others! All the others! My friend, if you want to know them all, I'll make you do some travelling."

CHAPTER XXII

MEANWHILE, at the Moulinettes, Madeleine was laboriously writing on a sheet of flowered notepaper that her brother had brought.

He sat at the table, opposite her, and the blue pools of his eyes were troubled and restless.

His accident had left its mark upon him; he carried his head low like a weakling who dares not look life in the face. His fine moustache, that he used to keep so trim, had grown bristly and seemed redder now in his emaciated face.

He had had one shock after another, these ten months since he was crippled.

First of all, the insurance company had given him only six hundred francs in all; when his expenses had been paid out of this, he had been left penniless.

For a few days in winter, he had found employment turning the crank of a grain separator, which was work for a child or a dotard, and he had performed it with a bad grace, just to earn his bread. In the spring he had found a fortnight's job at similar work in town. Then he had returned to Le Coudray where he had hunted up small odd jobs now and then, here and there. He was set to catching moles in the fields,—leading animals to

fairs,—gathering rocks, or trimming brushwood hedges with a sickle: mere trifles that were put his way for the sake of charity.

He had applied for an appointment as letter carrier, counting firmly on getting it at once, as his right; but nothing had come of it. However, his hopes had risen again these last days, concerning this; that is why he was writing to Violette.

“Well now, what do you want me to say, big brother?”

Madeleine had written the date line and the usual form of address; and now she was waiting, pen in hand.

“Well?”

“Make her a pretty compliment first, if you don’t mind, saying that I love her more than ever.”

“What compliment?”

“Tell her she’s a beauty—because she is! When she looks at you the weather brightens—it’s as though the morning sun were beginning to shine. All around her the air is young and smells sweet, like a breeze playing among the apple blossoms!”

“Goose! That’s only the scent she puts on!”

Madeleine laughed at his fervid air and resumed her writing.

“I have told her she is the best-looking girl in the county. True or false, it’ll please her. And I go on to say that you’d like to be always at her feet.”

"Say I'm longing for the sight of her."

"Haven't you seen her in such a long time?"

He did not answer her immediately; his lips quivered; then he said shamefacedly:

"It's just ten months and three weeks."

"Oh, you poor boy!"

Madeleine dropped her pen and looked at him out of eyes brimming with pity.

"But then, why do you want me to write? Why do you want me to write compliments to a hussy who's thrown you over?"

"Please, Madeleine, don't say anything against her; I wouldn't like it. If she didn't love me I'd go crazy. But she does, I tell you! She hasn't thrown me over. It's her mother—she's forbidden her to see me—that's what she wrote me in her reply to the letter you put down for me at the hospital.— Her mother doesn't want her to speak to a Dissenter.— Some people get hard when they're old.— What can she do? Just wait, that's all.— I've tried to meet her; I went to Chantepie, but she didn't dare to come out.— Her mother's watching her every minute! I've waited for her by the way-side, too, at the hour when she was due to come home from her work—but I've never had any luck.— Oh, yes,—once! I saw her coming—but there was a girl who helps her coming along with her, so, of course, she didn't speak—she just waved her hand at

me from a distance.— I can't stand it any longer; my head's swimming; I've got to talk to her!"

He paused, and then he added with an air of determination:

"Besides, I've got news for her!"

"What is it?" asked Madeleine.

"You'll say, first, that the matter of religion is not a hindrance. Let her tell that to her mother; I'm open to argument on that.— I'll see what I can do."

Madeleine pushed back the flowered paper angrily:

"You can't make my hand write that. I'd be too ashamed! Nobody in our family has ever changed himself. It's our pride. You'd be the first, and they'd point fingers at you!"

He kept silent.

"You don't stand up for our faith. . . . You leave your own people. . . . You give in. . . . Is that what you call being a man?"

She stopped, a little frightened at having flung such harsh words at her stricken brother. But it was her duty to speak out—there could be no doubt of that!—a duty hardly perceptible, yet as deeply rooted as the instinct of pity, which is in all good women—those guardians of the race.

He sat there in silence, head low, pale as death, and trembling.

"John, you're not a man! . . . You mustn't do

this. It's mean! We've got to hold on—hold on——”

He replied sullenly, with a break in his voice:

“Whatever you say doesn't matter; Violette wins. If it weren't for my being crippled, I wouldn't have come to this pass. Now I'm like an uprooted alder bush floating down stream.”

She let her look dwell on him for a while as he sat there all huddled up and so pitiful with his big, untidied head, his quivering lips—and that empty sleeve hanging at his side.

“Hold on! . . . Hold on! . . .”

She wasn't sorry she had spoken out as she had; she felt sure she had said only what had to be said. But, in the end, her mercy was upmost.

“Poor old dear, the hour of misery has indeed come upon you.”

She wept.

Then she picked up her pen and wrote the words of apostasy as she would have given a dying man his most outrageous wish, without a sound, for fear of showing how guiltily weak she knew herself to be.

When she had finished, she wiped her eyes and, seeing him still in the same dejected posture, she drew him to her and kissed him.

That gave him encouragement, and he said:

“There's something else I want her to know. I'm not rich just now, but I'm going to get a good job.

I'm sure of it, now. They're looking for another postman at Château-Blanc, and I'm to get the job."

Madeleine wrote this down quickly.

"Are you sure? When are you going to be appointed?"

"Maybe in a week, maybe in a month, maybe tomorrow. It just depends on how long it'll take for the red tape."

His voice rang clear as he added:

"As soon as I'm postman at Château-Blanc I hope Violette's mother will change her mind and let us get married. I'll get good wages, and with what she can earn at her trade working at home, we'll be pretty well fixed, I'd say!"

He winked slyly and went on, taking her into his confidence.

"Let me tell you, now: there are plenty of plums, only you must know how to get them! At first, I just made my application, all by myself. I've served my time in the army, haven't I? And they made me a corporal—and now I'm crippled—I've got the right on my side—and enough schooling—I've taught myself to write a little with my left hand.—All right! You think you have the job all sewed up tight? Well, you wait and see! Wait three months: nothing! six months: nothing! eight months: nothing!— Then I looked around and inquired, and some one told me: 'You'd better go and see M. Blanchard!' You have heard about M.

Blanchard, haven't you? All the Dissenters voted for him at election; it wasn't our fault that he lost.— All the same, he has a big pull, being for the Government. I didn't like one bit hunting him up, because I don't like to ask favours. But I made up my mind. I told him my business and this and that, giving answer to all his questions. He asked me for whom I voted. I didn't want to answer directly, but I said: 'I am a Dissenter!' He just chuckled in his big beard: 'Good! good! You can count on my help, young man, my very best help!'

"Oh, then, yes! The thing's settled," said Madeleine, sealing the letter.

"You've said it!"

This Monsieur Blanchard had formally promised the same position to three others after John Claran-deau. And only a few days later he had obtained the job of postman at Château-Blanc for one of the most militant young Catholics, a sad specimen who had promised to go back on his affiliations, to vote openly, before witnesses, and to make his people vote the same way.

CHAPTER XXIII

THERE was a clatter of wooden shoes at the door and a curious, sing-song voice called:

"Hey! Hey! Who's there? It's me, Jules.— Come in, my dear!— I will come in, if there's no bad boy in the house and no sticks behind the door."

Lalie was pale with fright and ran to clutch the skirts of Madeleine, who began to laugh.

"Don't be frightened: it's only Jules the natural, talking to himself. Is that you, Jules?"

"It's me, Jules. Come in, my dear."

"All right, then, come in."

The door opened and a man appeared who at once made the sign of the cross and then spat on the floor to show his disgust.

"You can sit down, Jules," said Madeleine; "there aren't any bad boys around."

The half-wit looked behind the furniture and under the bed; then he stood up in the middle of the room and began to mumble:

"Jules, why do you go to the Dissenters? My Lord God, I have no use for them. Jules, you close the gates of their field, you go and fill their jugs at the spring. My Lord God, it isn't true,

"Thou art a great liar! May the devil burn all the Dissenters!"

Once more he made the sign of the cross and thus having conjured away any possible bad luck he sat down quietly, sticking his feet out toward the grate.

Madeleine had gone back to her work, without paying much attention to him. She had known him for twenty years and she was used to his ways.

This Jules was a curious sort of half-wit. With a mind on a level of that of a small child, he yet had an astonishing memory. He knew all the villages five leagues round about; he knew all the fields, all the paths, all the trees. On the blackest night he could go anywhere without losing his way or hunting for it, even in parts of the country where he had been but once. He knew everybody by name, sometimes he would tell the youngsters what the weather had been like on the day of their christening and the names of their godfather and godmother and whether there had been any sugar almonds given away to the neighbours. When anybody asked him about things like that he replied at once, without even a moment's thought.

He was very gentle of temper and became angry only when somebody pretended that he ought to get married and insisted on it. If you wanted to get rid of him, you merely had to take a piece of paper and read aloud: "In the name of the law, Jules

the natural, I marry you to ——” That made him scamper away as fast as his legs would take him. One day, when some youngsters were teasing him like this after locking the door, he bit them and jumped at the window like a cornered cat.

He babbled to himself all day long, with questions and answers. You could hear him on the roads, keeping up an interminable conversation with his thousands of friends and acquaintances.

Often he talked with the Lord, and sometimes he would get excited and swing his stick, because He was making him sore with His indelicate questions.

Madeleine explained all this to Lalie as best she could, but the child’s fear of the man would not go.

“May the devil burn all the Dissenters! They stink like badgers!”

There was no fire in the grate; nevertheless he held his feet up to it in all seriousness.

“That isn’t nice talk,” said Madeleine. “Why do you say such things about the Dissenters?”

“They have pillows of chicken feathers and no nails under their wooden shoes—nor any pork in their pantry.— Would you like something to eat, Jules? A little mouthful, with a piece of bread.— Go away, Jules, we have nothing, we’re down and out, we can’t pay our debts.— Small fry!”

Madeleine smiled and gave him a big hunk of bread and a slice of pork. He ate it so eagerly that even Lalie was amazed.

Madeleine asked him the usual questions.

"How old are you now, Jules?"

"I entered the army at twenty-one. Now you count, from that."

"Jules, is it true you are going to get married?"

He was so well in his stride that he merely replied:

"I am a natural; God protects me."

"I've been told so, though. I've been told the mayor himself was going to marry you."

"May the devil burn the mayor!"

But this last had roused him and he had got up and run to the door.

"Sit down, Jules, he won't come here, never fear!— Sit down!"

He wouldn't be quieted and remained standing, with his eyes on the door.

"Have the Dissenters any more bread for Jules, who has some of his pork left?"

Madeleine handed him a small piece; he gobbled the rest of his pork and said:

"Have the Dissenters any more pork for Jules, who hasn't finished his bread?"

"You're a nice one!" said Madeleine. "Can't you be content with what I've given you? Here, take this slice and go away. I'm busy."

He hid the pork in his hand and swallowed the bread.

"Have the Dissenters——" he began.

"Stop it!" said Madeleine, who was trying to catch up with her work. "You aren't hungry any more."

"Dissenters have nails under their wooden shoes. They're big fry, they are!"

"That's all!"

"My Lord God, let the Dissenters sleep on goose feathers!— My Lord God, give them a-plenty to eat!"

"That's all!"

"Jules will tell the news."

Madeleine couldn't help laughing:

"You're a pest!— Go on, tell your news."

"The priest won't give Jules any cider. So Jules says, morning and night: 'My Lord God, Father Picon broke Friday's fast by eating a wren's nest.' Rivard has polled his grey cow. Bourru shut up the devil in his poultry yard and a big rooster pecked out his eye. Mme. Berceger is dead, Mme. Rousselot is dead, Mme. Piquereau is dead. The Protestant pastor has the dropsy in his belly—may he burst!— Have the Dissenters any bread?"

"All right, here you are! Eat!"

He took the bread and went on, by way of thanks.

"Trooper didn't get the job of postman; that made him madder than Jules."

Madeleine turned round as if struck:

"Hush! Don't say that!"

"What news do you want? Would you like to hear about the marriages?"

"All right, tell me about the marriages," said Madeleine.

"Louise Bruneau is marrying Jacques, of L'Ormeau. Pierre Harteau is marrying his cousin, of Monverger. Father Picon is marrying Julie-red-eye, the old witch of the Hardilas: bad business, that!"

"Too bad, I should say!" smiled Madeleine. "Go on!"

"Bray of the Little Pasture is going with Jeanne Lourigeon; Philip the mason is going with Bertha, of the lower village; Michael Corbier, your master here, is going with Violette, of Chantepie—and Jules is going with nails under his wooden shoes when he isn't going barefoot."

Madeleine came closer, not having heard well:

"What's that you say about Michael Corbier?"

"Corbier of the Moulinettes is going with Violette, the dressmaker."

"You're a liar, Jules!"

"My Lord God, is Jules a liar? No, Jules, you are not a liar."

"But who can have told you such a thing?" cried Madeleine.

"Boiseriot, of Chantepie, he told me. He said: 'Go and tell it to Madeleine, at the Moulinettes.'"

What did he give Jules for his trouble? A handful of sugar and a mellow pear."

"Oh, Boiseriot! Thank you! And now go away, Jules.— No, no, you won't get any more pork; you've eaten enough. You'd be sick. Go away, go away now! Or I'll call the mayor to marry you."

At this threat he skurried out into the yard and ran away as fast as he could.

"The mayor! May the devil burn the mayor! May he burn him!"

CHAPTER XXIV

AT the moment, Madeleine felt only a slight shock. It took her some time to realise that the wound was ugly and might rankle. At first she had thought only of herself. "Corbier of the Moulinettes goes to see Violette, the dressmaker!" Well, let him go! This was the second time she had been hurt in this way through Michael. But this second blow hurt less than the first; it didn't really upset her much.

Some girls she knew, in cases like this one, had gone into a decline; others had almost gone insane or had grown old all at once:—she couldn't quite see how such things could happen.

What was a "broken heart" but a fancy, something like a cloud over a mirror that you rubbed away with a cloth? There might be a few tears at first, but afterward!— With both hands busy from morning to night, a girl ought to get over such a small thing quickly enough.

For her own part, Madeleine was convinced of it. But other thoughts had come to trouble her—much more grievous and heart-rending thoughts.

What would become of her brother? He had seen Violette again; Madeleine knew it and she imagined, reasonably enough, that the hussy made a game of

searing men's hearts. If she encouraged Michael and Tom, Dick and Harry only to laugh at them afterwards, let her, and no great harm done! Why did the fools let her catch them? But with a cripple it wasn't the same at all; at least, not to Madeleine. Then the game became cruel and cowardly, a very ugly kind of sin.

What would become of poor Trooper? Already he had been doing some foolish things. Every now and again he got drunk; one night at Saint-Ambroise, while drunk, he had beaten up the inn-keeper and kicked a door in.

If it were only understood, once and for all, that Violette jilted him! But on the contrary! She had again found means of leading him on, and there was no doubt that she held him in leash closer than any of the other fellows.

When he heard about his sweetheart's behaviour—and Boiseriot would see to it soon enough that he did—there was sure to be trouble. The very thought of it made Madeleine shiver.

Then there was Michael, too. What on earth had come over him? A man of thirty, and fixed as he was! The idea of his falling in love with such a young thing whose head was filled with nothing but tricks! Was he thinking of marrying the girl? Anyhow, even if he was, Violette had no such intention! Just imagine the pretty little dressmaker in a work apron and clumsy wooden shoes!

And what about the children? Couldn't he think of them a little? Could anybody love them more than Madeleine? Could they possibly be torn away from her some day?

"Let them try! Just let them try!"

At the mere thought of it, Madeleine's head buzzed like a swarm of hornets.

"Oh, I'm just a big fool! Michael is only a bad boy having his fun.— If he gets hurt, so much the better! It's all plain foolishness and no more! Besides, how do I know there's any truth in it at all? I'll have to find out."

She began watching Michael.

The death of his father had been a blow to him; on the first Sundays after the funeral, he had stayed at home except to go to rosary prayers. Then, little by little, he resumed his old habits. Now he often didn't return home on Sundays until night-fall.

As he rarely went to the inn, Madeleine concluded that he must be gadding about. She tried to draw him out, but did not succeed.

He received letters outside of the house; twice the postman had asked Madeleine where Michael was at work. That was singular, rather strange——

At last the day came when Madeleine could doubt no longer. It was a Saturday in October. At eleven o'clock Madeleine was tasting the soup that she had just seasoned when the postman came in.

"Here's a letter for Michael Corbier!"

He held it high for a moment, sniffing the air.

"My, but it smells good! A pretty girl could use it as a sachet in her waist!"

Not wanting to make any comment, Madeleine asked:

"Can I get you a drink of wine? It's a warm day, walking."

He answered: "I just had a drink at Chestnut Hill—Thank you kindly, all the same. Good day!"

As soon as he had gone, Madeleine looked at the letter. It was on pretty blue notepaper, as smooth as a looking glass, and it did smell heavily of scent. The postmark in the corner was blurred and not easy to make out. Madeleine, however, could trace almost all the letters of the word "Chantepie."

A few minutes later, Michael came in from his ploughing.

"The postman brought a letter for you," said Madeleine. "It's there, on the table."

He seemed annoyed, picked up the letter and went out again without a word.

Instantly Madeleine flew to the window, behind the curtain.

Out in the yard, he was opening the envelop. A flower fell out; he picked it up very carefully and gazed on it; then he took a little notebook from his pocket and actually put his old flower between its leaves—the big silly!

That was a little too much for Madeleine to repress a movement of spite, and even while she tried to laugh, two big tears welled to her lashes.

She turned away, rushed to the soup kettle, threw off the lid with a great clatter, reached into the salt-box and dumped two big handfuls of salt into the soup.

After which she set a small pot to simmer by the fire, for the children.

PART TWO

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

IN a shady spot on the short-cut grass of the meadow, Lalie was trying to manage a "ring around" dance. Her right hand held one of Jo's and in her left dangled Zine, the wooden doll. She had crowned Jo with a wreath of rushes and over Zine's heart she had tied, with a bit of worsted thread, a big bunch of daisies. It was just like a wedding party.

*"Around, around the sleeping lake,—
Lazily, lazily sways the wind—
My white duck follows my black drake.
Merrily, merrily . . ."*

Here Lalie stopped, not remembering how it went on.

"Nêne, what comes now?"

Madeleine sang the next lines, bent over her washing:

*"Merrily, merrily plays the wind,
Lazily, lazily sways the wind."*

"Oh yes! I remember now!"

Lalie jumped with pleasure and went on, turning around more rapidly:

*"The King's son comes and aims his gun.—
Lazily, lazily sways the wind.—
He kills my duck, the bad King's son . . ."*

Again she stopped, memory failing, and began to lose her temper.

"It's Jo! You simply can't play with him! When I say 'wind!' we ought to run. Jo drags and drags! Are you going to run, yes or no, when it's the wind?"

She shook Jo, who gave Zine a kick, and the game was broken up.

Madeleine turned to look:

"Well? Aren't you going to go on playing?"

"It's Jo's fault!" said Lalie. "He has broken one of Zine's legs . . . And he won't do anything but drag and drag!"

Jo said nothing but went to hide behind Madeleine's skirts. That made Lalie jealous. She began rocking her doll in her arms:

"Come here, poor little Zine!— Lalie loves only Zine, so there!"

"Is that so? Don't you love Nêne a little too?"

"Yes, I do!" said the little girl, running to the washing-plank by the stream and starting to jump up and down on it with her brother.

Madeleine kissed them both in turn, holding her hands back so as not to wet their clothes.

"You'll tumble into the water," she said, "and you'll make me fall in too!— Run away, now!"

"Will you dance with us?" begged Lalie: "Come on! I'll take your hand, and you can hold Zine on the other side."

"Jo, too," said the baby.

Madeleine hugged them both between her elbows, hands held away.

"I haven't time to-day! I have to wash your pinafores and stockings, you know."

"I wish somebody'd play!" said Lalie.

"There, there! Start your dance again. I'll sing for you!"

The little girl clapped her hands.

"All right! Come on, Jo! Come on, Zine! Sing the wind song, Nêne."

Madeleine began to sing:

The King's son comes and aims his gun.—

Lazily, lazily sways the wind.—

He kills my duck, the bad King's son!

Merrily, merrily plays the wind,

Lazily, lazily sways the wind.

"Go on!" called Lalie. "Go on, Nêne!"

Madeleine continued, marking the measure with her beetle and not losing a minute with her wash:

The black drake swims now all alone.—

Lazily, lazily sways the wind.—

You wicked Prince, see what you've done!

Merrily, merrily plays the wind,

Lazily, lazily sways the wind.

"Go on! Go on! We're having fun now!"

Madeleine thought:

"They'll drive me crazy!"

And her eyes danced with laughter.

She got to the end of the song and began it all over again. When she turned to see how the game was going, she found that the children weren't listening any more.

Lalie had seated Zine, whose knees wouldn't bend, and was making her recite her rosary. Jo was busy pulling up handfuls of grass, grunting at every pull with the effort of it, and sticking out his tongue.

"I'm like a blind fiddler who strikes up a dance after the wedding guests have gone. The children have more sense than I; if they'd kept hopping around all this time they'd have been in a sweat. Really now, I'm just a fool!"

She took her time wringing out some clothes, the better to listen to Lalie.

"Before long, that child will be giving me ideas about how to do 'most everything round the house."

A gust of pride swelled her breast, and her eyes became vague, and her thoughts frisked ahead into the years, as spry as a yearling.

"When Jo is grown up, I'll be an old woman. Perhaps I won't be at the Moulinettes any more— Lalie'll have taken my place.— Who knows where I'll be? Jo'll come to see me and I'll make him a cup of coffee.— He'll go away for his service in the army, but he'll get furloughs.— 'Hello, Nêne! So you're still at your spinning wheel!"— His

sabre'll drag, clatter, clatter, behind him; then I'll ask him if they're giving him plenty to eat, and I'll give him a silver piece.— And then he'll have a sweetheart and they'll get married.— Dear Lord, make that I have money enough so he won't be ashamed of me at the wedding, and so I can make him a fine present!"

She gave a bunch of clothes their final wring and bent again over her wash.

It was a beautiful place for washing. The lively little stream rippled over its uneven bed with a jingling as of tiny bells. Above the rubbing plank the water was so clear that the bottom was plainly visible. Schools of minnows sailed across it, coming up close to the surface at times and there whirling round and round, all together.

Madeleine thought:

"Perhaps the little things are dancing a round too, and their mother leads the game from down below. How pretty all God's creatures are when they're young.— I'd like to know where the mother minnow is, and if she is looking out for her children."

Madeleine went about her work with the quick, telling movements of the experienced washerwoman. She wasn't afraid of wetting her arms nor of dashing the spray in her face. To save the clothes from wearing out too quickly, she rubbed them between her hands instead of on the board and she was very

saving with the soap. She did the rinsing quickly, shaking out the linen with a lively snap that flung up the ends of it as high as her face.

She had washed first the men's clothes and the kitchen towels; remained the children's little things, and these she wanted particularly clean. On the following Sunday their cousin whose farm was called "L'Ouchette," or Little Pasture, was giving a dinner. Michael could not go, but Madeleine was to take the children there. She meant to do everything possible to make Jo and Lalie look handsomer than the other children.

So she spread a petticoat of flowered stuff over her board and began to soap it with great care; then she rubbed it a long while, but very gently. This was the kind of work she enjoyed, and she would have liked to prolong it.

*Merrily, merrily plays the wind,
Lazily, lazily sways the wind . . .*

The roundelay had come back to her lips, as sweet as a chocolate drop. On she went, rubbing, rubbing; between her big fingers the thin stuff disappeared in a mass of foamy suds.

Zine having finished reciting her rosary, Lalie had laid her flat on her back, pretending the poor thing was very ill, and had gone to fetch Jo. He had come with a bunch of grass in both his fists.

"Jo, let's play Zine has a tummy-ache. I'll be

her mamma; I'll rock her on my lap—you'll bring her some tisane. Let's play like that!"

Jo was not in a mood for it and shook his head.

"Nêne didn't say!"

"Never mind!—Zine will cry. I'll dry her eyes and wipe her nose."

"Nêne didn't say!"

Lalie pulled Jo by the arm.

"You're a bad boy, that's what you are!"

Jo tried to give Zine a kick; he didn't reach her because she was lying flat on the grass and he lifted his foot very high, intending to kick hard. So he leaned down quickly and rubbed Zine's face with a handful of grass.

Lalie gave him a push that made him roll over. Jo set up a howl and Lalie howled the louder.

"Nêne!" cried Jo.

"Nêne! Nêne!" cried Lalie.

Madeleine sprang to her feet and ran towards them, with her hands all white with suds.

Whatever she was doing, now-a-days, she dropped everything the minute the children cried for her. It made her lose much time every day and she reproached herself for it, but that never kept her from doing it again; their cries echoed in her breast; they hurt her.

"Yes, they'll drive me crazy all right, poor darlings!"

She wiped her hands and covered the children

with hugs and kisses. Then she joined in their game, played being Zine's mamma, while Lalie showed Jo what to do with the tisane.

When they were well started again, she ran back to her work. Time was flying; she was all upset about having wasted those few moments.

"If I had a mistress, she'd give me a fine scolding!— Playing with dolls—that's going too far! Well, now I'd better hurry and get done!"

She plunged her arms into the stream and began rinsing one of Lalie's little shifts in lively fashion. But no, it wouldn't do to hurry over work like this! As she was wringing it out, she saw the water dripping still soapy from it; so she rinsed it all over again. How soft the fine wisp felt to her hands!

"Little shift, come out nice and white. Pretty lace, I'll dip you in starch so you'll stand out as neat as a daisy's little collar."

"Ha-a-h!"

A scream rose from near by, along the stream, while Lalie called out in great fright:

"Nêne! Nêne!"

Madeleine was up in a flash, her legs shaking, her heart standing still. The baby was nowhere to be seen.

"Jo, where are you? Jo!"

Lalie pointed to the stream. Another, sharper scream pierced the air.

Madeleine rushed forward, bumping against her

tressel and spilling all the clean clothes in the mud, leaving her wooden shoes behind so she could run faster.

Jo had fallen into the stream. Fortunately he had picked out a calm spot. Two yards further on, the current would have tossed him, but here his head was above water, poor duckling, and God knows if he didn't open his bill!

Madeleine pulled him out on the grass and took off his clothes. He was yelling his head off, and he would have yelled still louder if he hadn't been shivering so with cold. When she had him lying naked in the grass, he went right on yelling while Madeleine rubbed his back to warm him. She herself was whiter than a sheet.

"He's frozen to the bone! Pray God he doesn't fall ill, now!"

She untied her apron to wrap around the baby, but it was wet. There was nothing at hand but her skirt that was dry and woolly. Not for an instant did she hesitate, nor even glance up to see if there was anyone in sight: her hands flew to take off her skirt and throw it over the baby like a bell. Then, finding herself with nothing on but a chemise, she rushed to the overturned tressel and tied one of the newly washed petticoats around her waist.

"Come, little Jo. Let's run home! Are you still cold?"

She ran to the house, taking the shortest way,

jumping across the ditches. As she passed by a hedge, a thorn buried itself so deep in her bare heel that her heart went cold and tears shot to her eyes. But she ran on, limping, with her wet petticoat slapping about her legs. Crossing the goat-pasture, her foot sank ankle-deep in a manure drain, but on she went.

The baby had quieted down now, feeling warm and at ease in the folds of the soft woollen skirt; her running jogged him and he enjoyed it hugely. When Madeleine reached the house and wanted to put him to bed, he protested and struggled and clung to her neck.

"More run, Nêne, more run!"

But this time she did not give in, she was too afraid he might have caught a chill. She put him in his cradle and warmed him between two pillows. Then she dressed him in dry clothes and his Sunday smock.

"Are you still cold, Jo, darling? If you are, I'll heat you some sugared wine."

"Yes, Jo is cold."

She ran to get the sugar, the spirit lamp, the bottle of wine.

"There, now! Drink, darling! Does it taste good?"

Jo kept his nose in his cup and replied between swallows:

"Jo'll do it again!"

Madeleine bent over him, worried.

"What's that? What will you do again?"

"The water—Jo'll fall in again!" he said with a determined air.

CHAPTER II

NEXT day Madeleine had to do her wash all over again, and every day, that week, she had to sit up very late in order to make up for lost time.

When the children's clothes were all ready, Madeleine was not yet satisfied. She remembered a dinner Corbier had given before the death of his father. The little cousins had come dressed up with all sorts of ribbons and furbelows, for their mother thought much of appearance; but they had also brought some aprons along, so they could play without soiling their finery, and their mother had said pointedly:

"You've got to be careful and watch out for everything. If you don't, you can't make ends meet."

Madeleine thought:

"She's putting on airs for my benefit! She's welcome! But with all her watching out, she's only a braggart; you don't need aprons with so much lace trimming to keep a cotton dress from being mussed up."

Yes, that is what she had said to herself at the time.

But now the incident bothered her; not for her-

self but for the children, who must not stand behind the others in anything.

That Friday a passing pedlar knocked at the door and offered his wares to Madeleine.

"I've got some grand aprons—the latest style.—You ought to take advantage of the opportunity, Ma'am!"

"Thank you," said Madeleine, "I'm not in need of anything."

The pedlar, who knew his business, pointed to Lalie and Jo.

"Are these two all you have, Ma'am?"

"Yes," she said, turning red.

"It's a good beginning! They're pretty little dears. Don't you want to buy them anything? Come and look at what I've got, anyhow."

Madeleine followed him out to the road; he had a big cart standing there, all filled with new goods.

"I might perhaps take two smocks," said Madeleine.

"Good quality, and up to date style, of course?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Here you are—and here are some more—and just have a look at these!"

Such piles he displayed for her!—small ones, large ones,—red and green and blue.

"Make your choice, Ma'am. But if you want my advice, Ma'am: I think these here are the best in every way."

He held up a pretty smock of unbleached linen with embroidery on the sleeves and little figures, done in all colors, dancing along the hem. This was the very smock Madeleine's eye had also picked out.

"It'll cost too much," she said.

"Not at all, Ma'am—only two francs seventy-five! I'll let you have two of them, all ready to wear, for five francs. What do you say?"

"Oh, it's too much!" she said, but her tone consented.

She went into the house to get the money.

Five francs! Such a lot of money! Nor was it a necessary expense just then.

She opened the drawer where Michael's purse was kept. Five Francs! Of course, Michael needn't know about it; he never asked accounts of the purchases she made, never thought of inquiring into the price she had paid for this thing or that. She took out a five-franc piece and closed the drawer.

"No, I won't, after all! I want to pay for this out of my own money."

She put back Michael's coin and took her own purse out with her.

The pedlar had the smocks already wrapped.

"You ought to throw in two little handkerchiefs to put in the pockets."

"I couldn't possibly, Ma'am.— But I'll sell you some at cost price."

Madeleine paid for the smocks and the handker-

chiefs. And then she bought a pretty red silk ribbon for Lalie's hair; and then two pairs of fine open-work stockings.

"You empty my purse!" she told the pedlar, and laughed.

"The pedlar replied:

"You don't look as if you were sorry! You are quite right, too!— I understand: I have children of my own."

"Oh! Do you live far from here?"

"I should say so!——"

The pedlar flushed a little.

"I should say so! I'm from Auvergne. I've got four kids there. It ain't easy for me to go 'way an' leave 'em, I c'n jus' tell ye that!"

"Still,—a father going away," said Madeleine, "that isn't so bad,—but if their mother had to go away and leave them, like that——!"

"Their mother! Ah, yes, their mother!— She left 'em, all right!"

"Is she dead?"

"No—cleared out, that's all— — Where is she now? Don't ask me!"

His alert business air had dropped from him; he was just a poor soul shaken by sorrow, and so he reverted to his native country speech.

"She left, the slut—quit 'em just like that!— four of 'em as they be!— An' me—I've got to keep me business goin', I have!— The two littlest

be just like yours: the oldest, he's goin' most blind. Can I be lookin' after him? Can I be makin' him all right again?— Lord 'n Heaven! we ain't all got a happy lot!"

Meanwhile he had finished folding away his goods. His back straightened as if he were ashamed of having let himself go like this before a stranger, and, without a trace of his country accent, he said:

"Thank you, Ma'am; if I come back this way, I hope you'll be kind enough to look at my goods again."

Then, having politely raised his cap to her, he took his whip and the horses were off.

Madeleine grumbled as she walked back to the house.

"Women like that,—they ought to be sent to the galleys. I'm glad there aren't many of them in these parts. What a place it must be—that Auvergne!"

CHAPTER III

THAT Sunday was a bright, sunny day. The sky was blue, the sun beamed festively.

The breeze was gently playful, running in ripples over the green fields spiked with yellow, or shaking the ears one by one as if to count them; and then it blew upward again to frolic among the trees.

The hedges had dressed themselves up in their new leaves. Flowers were showing their prettiest wide-open faces all round about. Even the poor little grasses by the wayside had prinked themselves—watch them straightening up on their stalks and trying to shine! And the birds were carolling like mad.

Madeleine walked slowly, holding Jo by the hand; from time to time she picked him up and carried him on her arm a little way. Lalie was trotting in front, with her curly hair whipping her shoulders.

A cuckoo was singing in a cherry tree at the turn of the road; Lalie stole up on tiptoe to try and see the bird, but he flew away as she came on and perched somewhere far away.

“Coo-coo! Coo-coo!”

The little girl turned round with shining eyes:

"Nêne! Do you hear that one? I believe I frightened him away!"

She babbled on, dancing in the sunshine:

"I'm happy! Come, Jo! Let's play! Come along, both of you!"

Jo scampered to his sister and made chorus with her, calling:

"Coo-coo! Coo-coo! Where are you, coo-coo?"

Madeleine watched them running ahead of her and thought them as handsome as the children of the rich.

She had put the new stockings on them and their little legs showed through. At the last moment she had sewed two double rows of pearl buttons on Jo's short little trousers; and on her arm she was carrying the smocks she had bought of the pedlar.

She, too, had dressed up. She had put on her Sunday skirt and her best silk apron. When there was a puff of wind, the bands of her muslin cap flipped about her face. She walked with her head held high and felt as happy as could be.

There were half a dozen children that day, visiting the cousin of the Little Pasture. Lalie and Jo were the prettiest among them. However hard it was for them, the women complimented Madeleine, who thereupon lifted her head the higher. They had given her a place at the end of the table, a little off from the others, because she was not one

of the family. She took Jo on her lap and made him eat from her plate, saying:

"He's used to it; otherwise he wouldn't eat a thing."

She talked gaily, held up her end against the jesting of the men; and told the story of the Auvergne woman who had left her children.

The cousin asked if it was that woman's husband who had sold her the children's clothes.

"Not all of them," replied Madeleine, "but some."

The cousin pinched her mouth:

"I went out to his cart, too, but his prices were too high. We can't afford to throw away money, in this family!"

Madeleine wanted to laugh.

"She's always the same, this one!" she thought. "Did I ask her for the money to pay for this finery? —When I want money, I know where to look for it!"

All through the day this thought gladdened her heart. And even that evening, on the way back to the Moulinettes, she mumbled to herself:

"I've got money of my own, I have! If it suits me to waste it, what of it?— If it's my pleasure?— I've got two hundred and fifty francs in the savings bank.— What are they for, I'd like to know, these two hundred and fifty francs? What did I save them for!"

CHAPTER IV

FOR some time Madeleine was perfectly satisfied with life.

Trooper had applied for another postman's job and while he was waiting for it he worked at a few odd jobs, and there was no more talk about quarrels and drinking bouts.

At the Moulinettes, Michael was spending very little time indoors; even on Sundays he was rarely seen about. Madeleine was glad of it.

"He's having a good time," she thought. "He doesn't mean anything by it.— So much the better for me, then! He won't be thinking of getting married again.— That little dressmaker surely wouldn't want my place here!"

In truth, Madeleine had been rather fearful for a while; but now she laughed at herself for having taken seriously such seemingly groundless fears.

Michael did not talk to her often, but always in a friendly way. He left her entirely free; she kept his purse, did the buying and selling as she saw fit. Sometimes she tried to make him go over her accounts, but he only shook his head laughingly and said:

"Never mind! Never mind! I trust you!"

If he had listened to her, however, he might have

noticed that she was cheating. For instance, when she told him she had bought a pair of clogs for Jo for five francs, he wouldn't have needed to look very hard to see that the clogs were a very pretty pair of shoes, worth at least double that sum.

Also, he wouldn't have been dense enough to believe that in a whole month she had bought only one cake of chocolate at the grocery, when the children were always having their hands full of dainties.

But nothing roused his suspicion. The housework was done, the children were thriving, the farm was beginning to prosper again; that was all that mattered to him. His mind was much too busy with outside concerns to look very closely at how things were managed at home.

Madeleine noticed this indifference on his part and slyly took advantage of it.

In the drawer below the clothes-press two purses lay side by side. For all ordinary purchases, all necessary expenses, she dipped into Michael's; but when it was a matter of doing something special for the children, she opened her own. She paid out of her own money for everything like dainties, pleasures or unessential finery. It was so easy for her to buy things in this way and the joy of the children was like sunshine in her heart.

Only one thing kept her from going beyond all bounds: her purse was slender; very soon it would be empty.

Some years past she had stopped handing her wages over to her mother, but made her a small allowance, instead, to help her out. She had also sent some money to her brother while he was doing his military service, and even now she slipped him a coin every once in a while. So she couldn't save up such a lot.

Of course she had those two hundred and fifty francs tucked away in the savings bank, but she wasn't yet thinking of drawing them out. She made her accounts:

"I have eight francs left. All-Saints day's coming in two months, and then Corbier will give me my wages.— If I don't buy anything for myself, I can manage.— I'll have to do with a little less pleasure for the children, that's all.— But next winter I'll catch up!"

One Sunday, walking with the children along the road to Saint-Ambroise, she came across a man named Bouju, a bachelor of thirty-five or so, who was distantly related to her. While walking on beside her, he told her about his affairs, his tastes and how much he had been able to save up. Then he suggested that she would be wise to get married, that he liked her very much, and that—well, here he was, and would she take him?

"My goodness! If I ever expected anything like this——!"

She had stopped walking, taken utterly by sur-

prise, and this idea of marriage struck her as so funny that she began to laugh.

Oh, yes, this man Bouju looked honest enough, and her own heart was quite free—but all the same, it gave her a good laugh.

CHAPTER V

THERE came a morning when Madeleine's heart was heavy. The day before she had been to Saint-Ambroise and had brought the children nothing but a pound of shortbread; and they had sniffed at the dainty that used to content them.

Lalie, especially, had shown bad temper, but that was because she had asked Madeleine to buy her a doll, a big doll that stood in Mme. Blanchevirain's show-window in the village. And she had framed her demand in exactly the right way for effect, saying:

"Germaine of the Little Pasture has three dolls,—yes, she has! Her mother buys her all the dolls she wants.— And I haven't got a single one, since Zine's head is broken."

Madeleine's heart was very heavy and very troubled. Still, she knew she had done the right thing. All she had left was five francs, and the doll—for of course she had priced it!—cost three francs. It would have been folly to buy it, for All-Saints day was still far away, and how far would two miserable francs take her!

But just think of this girl, Germaine! Three dolls of her own! Why not ten? What could she

be doing with her three dolls? Her mother had simply bought them for her to show off with!

Madeleine worked herself into a temper.

"That woman, I know her! She's just a braggart! She makes me tired, she does! Every chance she sees me, she gives me a dig! . . . Three dolls! The idea of throwing money away like that!— All right, let her! Let her buy all she wants! . . . it won't make her big Germaine any the cleverer nor any the prettier, either! . . . Just let her try and compare her with Lalie! . . . As soon as All-Saints day comes around, if I don't buy a doll that costs all of five francs, I'll lose my name. Just you wait! I'll show you!——"

She was grumbling away like this while stirring up the fire and wielding the tongs with noisy energy.

A big voice rang out behind her:

"Well, well! Why all this racket?"

She rose from her knees, blushing; but as she recognised her brother she burst out laughing.

He had come up the path without her hearing him and now he stood on the threshold.

"It's you," she said; "come in."

He came up to her to give her a kiss and laughed as he said:

"What a fine morning! The sun's shining like a benediction."

At the back of his blue eyes, however, some sort of uneasiness was prowling. Madeleine did not

notice it and was honestly glad to see him in such a pleasant mood.

"Where are you bound for, passing this way, big brother?"

"Down valley, to Rivard's place. He sent for me, and I thought I'd pass round this way to see how you are getting along; you're making yourself so scarce at Le Coudray."

"I've got my hands full, you see; and with the children it's hard to get away."

Trooper had taken a seat. For a while he talked about his affairs. He had been quite busy for some time past, and this week too he expected to have work every day.

Madeleine stopped working; an idea was trotting through her head.

"No doubt he's got some money—he'd be glad to let me have some, I'm sure—I'd only need to ask."

Then the thought came to her that it would be wrong of her to ask;—that she wouldn't dare, young and strong as she was, to take money from this poor brother who had so much trouble earning his bread.

"Still, I've been giving him money, even before he was crippled.— Besides, after All-Saints day, I'd return it.— I could go right away to Mme. Blanchevirain and get the doll with the eyes that close, the one that costs three francs.— Wouldn't Lalie be glad, though!"

She dwelled on the thought of it, hands idle and eyes shining. She wasn't listening to her brother any more; temptation was upon her like a thunder-cloud.

Suddenly she made her decision:

"Well, now, big brother, if you're working every day, you ought to be pretty well off, at present?"

He gave a little start and his thoughts followed hers in this new direction.

"Well off? Goodness, no!— It's all I can do to earn a living!"

He lowered his eyes, repeating:

"It's all I can do—all I can do!—I never have a penny in my pocket."

Usually he didn't need to say even as much as that; Madeleine hardly waited for a hint before slipping him a coin. To-day she made no move.

"I'm dressed like a tramp; see, my shoes are falling off my feet—I'm crazy for a smoke."

Still she said nothing. Pale and with tears in his eyes he stammered:

"Madeleine, listen to me.— It's hard for me to say this—Madeleine, you don't happen to have a little money?"

"Well, now—of all things!"

She threw this at him in an angry tone, standing quite motionless, baffled by the unexpected shock.

Surprise at her attitude made him speechless for a moment; then he got up.

"Well, sister, I'll say good-bye, then."

But he had not gone three steps before Madeleine threw herself at his neck.

"My dear! Don't go away!— Wait till I tell you how it is.— We mustn't quarrel, you and me!— Money! All right, I'll give you some.— Sometimes a person talks before thinking, don't you see!"

She held him tightly in her strong arms and forced him to sit down again.

"Money—for your tobacco—of course, I'll give you some, you poor old dear!"

She had fetched her purse and was counting out some coppers, one by one, lingeringly.

"There! Fifteen sous—will that be enough?"

He replied bitterly:

"A pack of tobacco doesn't cost as much as that."

"That's so," she said.

The coppers were lined up on the table. She took away five of them, blushed—and put them back.

She laid away her purse immediately, and then, in order to forget the incident as quickly as possible, she began to talk about her mother, about Fridoline, and she laughed at Tiennette who was being seen walking out with Gideon. But he stuck to his theme:

"Madeleine, you didn't understand—and it is my fault. I didn't explain myself right; I didn't tell you the truth—I'm not craving for any tobacco.

—As for money, I'm making a little every day—I've got some, but not enough for what I want it for. Lend me twenty francs—lend me ten francs—lend me just five francs, will you?"

"Five francs! Why, that's all I have!" exclaimed Madeleine.

"I'll give it back to you when I get a job,—as I'll give you back all you've given me before."

"You won't do any such thing! I share my little bit with you, big brother, and that's as it should be. If you want to pay me back for what I've given you, pay me back in affection."

It upset her to see him shaking there before her, and she came to him and said, very gently and very low:

"John, tell me all about it! Something is tormenting you. Tell me your trouble and I'll comfort you.— If it's money you want, I've got a-plenty in the savings bank; I'll go and draw out some for you."

He took her hand and kissed it. His words came heavily, brokenly:

"Yes!—poor sister! Work! Work your hands off, work your eyes out!—I'm there,—waiting to take your money and throw it to the winds; and when you are old, you'll live on charity!"

"John, don't talk like that! You're hurting me!"

"Poor sister!—do you want to know where goes the money you give me? Go to Chantepie and ask

Violette, the dressmaker. When you lay eyes on her, look her over from head to foot; look at her belt with the silver buckle, look at her fingers and her ears and her neck . . . On her right hand she wears a gold ring set with brilliants; I bought it for her. On her left hand she has two more rings, and who gave her those? And who's given her the earrings and the necklaces? It wasn't her mother, nor was it me! And yet, I love her, I love her."

"But you're stark mad, you poor dear!"

"I love her! Yes, I'm mad, I know! Yes, open your eyes wide! Look at me!— I'm bringing shame on the family.— One of these days I'll end like a dangerous animal."

Madeleine was appalled and tried to raise his head.

"Don't talk like this, for God's sake! What is it you need? You asked for money:—you'll have it. I'll give you all you want;—only don't talk like that—don't!"

"Money! yes, give me some. Give me five francs—It's the last time I'll ask you—I'm short of just five francs to buy the watch she wants."

And he added, utterly crushed:

"And then, someone else will give her a chain.— I'm a coward; I'm not a man; just as you said once."

Madeleine emptied her purse and, without a word, slipped the money into his pocket.

"Thank you," he said, "and now I must be on

my way. And this evening, if I've finished early enough at Rivard's, I'll go and buy the watch; she'll have it to-morrow, because she's working at Saint-Ambroise this week. Didn't you see her pass by this morning? Your master's sure to have seen her! —Good-bye, then—no, don't kiss me,—no, don't! I don't deserve it."

He went away and Madeleine returned to her work, with tears running down her cheeks. After a minute or two, Lalie ran in and stood up before her:

"You're crying, I see! It's your turn! I cried my eyes out yesterday, I did! The Lord has punished you: that'll teach you!— Now are you going to get me the big doll at Mme. Blanchevirain's shop?"

Madeleine leaned down to the little girl and hugged her passionately.

"Yes, darling, I'll go and get it, never you fear! Let them all do their darndest; you'll have your doll."

On the spur of the moment she had reached this decision.

At noon, she told Michael:

"I'll have to go to market to-morrow. We've got some twenty pullets ready to sell, and a basketful of butter, and some eggs."

He said:

"All right. I'll tell the carter to come and fetch the lot."

CHAPTER VI

SO next day, after market, Madeleine went to the savings bank to draw out twenty francs, out of which she bought, at a town shop, a doll that was much grander than the one at Mme. Blanchevirain's.

Coming back home, she took the Saint-Ambroise road. As she passed through the village she saw through an open window two young seamstresses laughing as they worked. A little behind them she saw another girl, a tall one, standing very straight, scissors in hand; and on her breast there hung a new and shining little watch.

Madeleine's heart heaved with anger.

"She's got it! She got it already! When I meet her, I'll tell her what I think of her! I'll teach her, I will, to rob Lalie and Jo!"

That very evening she watched out for Violette, who had to pass by the Moulinettes on her way home to Chantepie. But all for nothing; neither that evening nor the next nor the next did Violette come by.

But on Friday evening, as Madeleine was picking vegetables in the garden, she heard voices on the road; she straightened up and recognised the two girl helpers, who came along chattering and seem-

ingly having great fun over something. She let them get out of sight before she stepped to the roadside.

"Well, now!" she mumbled.

At a turning a short distance back, Violette was standing before Michael, her head bent flirtatiously.

"All right," said Madeleine, I'll wait for her a bit farther on."

She withdrew noiselessly, went back to the house, glanced at the children and ran out the back way toward the pond.

She didn't have to wait long. Violette came on at a swift pace, hurrying to overtake her girl helpers. When she was close enough, Madeleine climbed over a low fence and posted herself in the middle of the road.

"Good evening, Mademoiselle Violette!"

"Good evening," replied the dressmaker, turning a bit to one side so as to pass by quickly.

Madeleine went on:

"You seem to be in a hurry!"

"So I am."

"There's something I want to say to you, though."

"You? To me?"

"Yes—and I'm not doing this for my own pleasure, and maybe it won't be for yours either."

"You don't say!" said Violette, standing still.

She said: "You don't say!" and gave a short, dry, mocking laugh. Her eyes glanced over Made-

leine from head to foot, with such insolence that Madeleine asked rather angrily:

"Why are you looking me over like that? Doesn't my skirt fit me?"

"Oh, beautifully! It's quite even all round. My grandmother used to wear one just like it, and she'd inherited it."

"You've got a quick tongue!"

"At your service."

For quite a while they looked each other straight in the eye; then Violette threw back her pretty, insolent head:

"May I ask, in turn, what you're finding about me that isn't to your taste?"

Madeleine answered:

"I was looking at your watch. I think it's pretty."

"Would you like to see it closer?"

"Thank you, no; I can see it very well; it's a new-fangled watch; it isn't an heirloom like your grandmother's skirt."

"You said that very neatly!—but whether it's new-fangled or not is none of your business."

"I beg your pardon! I happen to know when you got that watch and who gave it to you!—And you needn't play the artless either, my dear!"

Violette was taken aback; color rose to her cheeks and her thin white nostrils quivered.

"Well, and what of it?"

"You haven't got much self-respect!" said Madeleine. "That watch and those rings you're wearing—you never paid for them!"——

The girl tossed her head and her laugh came sharp as the crack of a whip.

"Indeed I did!" she said. "I paid for them!"

Madeleine gasped.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You've committed a grievous sin!—If your mother heard you!"

But she saw that impudence was sovereign in the girl's black eyes and, knowing that all admonition would be wasted, she changed her tone.

"From now on, you'll leave my brother alone! Since nothing will hold you back, neither shame, nor religion——"

Violette broke in, trying to down her speech:

"Religion! I've got as much religion as you have, any day! You're a fine one to boast about your religion! Better go and be baptised, first!"

". . . and since you don't care about your mother's feelings, I'll keep my eye on you! Now, listen to me! If you start again leading him on, I'll mete you out your punishment myself!—Oh, you may laugh!"

"Indeed! What was that you said? You'll mete me out my punishment? I'd like to know how! Maybe you'll beat me up?—You've got the muscle to do it, all right—and the face!—No?—

you won't beat me up?—Well then, how will you go about it?"

Yes, how would she go about it? Madeleine felt confused by the girl's insolent stare. However, she managed to say:

"I'll begin by warning my brother; I'll tell him of your behaviour."

"He probably knows it better than you!"

"I'll tell him that on the very day he gave you that watch you listened to another suitor; I'll tell him that a while ago I saw you with Michael Corbier."

"Ah, now we're coming to the point!" cried Violette. "You're jealous! Why didn't you say so right away?"

"You're wrong. Leave my brother in peace and, for all of me, you can go your own way where it suits you. But if you worry him again——"

"You'll spy on me!—You'll use every means of running me down to your master!—I know why!"

Violette had come close; her expression was so vicious that it made her pretty face quite ugly.

"Others have been jealous of me before, but never yet a monkey-face like you!"

Madeleine let this pass without much resentment. Violette came closer still and said, with her evil laugh:

"Listen to me! You're not up to this game!—Since nothing will hold you back—that's the way

you talk, isn't it?—since nothing will hold you back, neither shame nor religion nor the fear of your mother, I'll mete you out your punishment myself! To begin with, you'd better get used to the idea of leaving the Moulinettes."

Madeleine's face went white and her hands crept up to her throat.

"What do you say? What do you dare to say?"

"You needn't take on and start yelling like that! I'm being very nice about it—I'm giving you a month's notice, before All-Saints—That leaves you plenty of time to look for another place."

"But you don't know—you can't imagine——"

"Oh, yes, don't you fear! I know, I can imagine; and that's just why I'll make you leave. Perhaps it'll teach you to mind your own business."

Madeleine stammered, strangling:

"No, you're wrong, it isn't what you think—I'm not jealous, God knows!—It's on account of the children.—Oh, you couldn't be so wicked!"

"The children? Bah, what nonsense!—You're not their mother; you're nothing to them.—What's the matter? Are you going to beat me?"

"Shut up!—Mademoiselle Violette, you shut up!"

"Mademoiselle Violette, at present!—But you can't budge me! You'll get out, my dear, and when you're out, you'll never see either father or children again!—I'll have the house forbidden to you!"

"Ah! I wish I could throttle you, you wicked thing!"

Madeleine threw out her hands.—But the girl walked away holding her glossy little head erect, like a viper.

"Madeleine Clarandeu, you started this, and you'll be sorry!—I'll see that you remember me."

Then she mumbled to herself:

"Well, my good Boiseriot, who thought she was going to give so much trouble,—who stopped at nothing to fling mud at her,—you'll thank me for this day's work!"

CHAPTER VII

ON Monday, Michael started the offensive. From early morning on, he tried to pick quarrels with Madeleine. At night he returned to the charge without the shadow of a reason, not even waiting until the farm-hands had gone away.

The following days it was the same song over again. A mortal apprehension began to gnaw at Madeleine's heart. From time to time she tried to buoy herself up:

"He wouldn't dare; he'd have to find a good reason for sending me away.—Besides, it seems to me he's beginning to calm down."

Then Violette passed by the farm, or wrote a letter, and right away the bad weather was on her again.

Madeleine never answered Michael back. Most of the time she did not even hear what he said. The blood rushed to her cheeks and as quickly back again; her heart felt cold; sometimes it pounded against her chest like the strokes of a hammer, stopped still, and went on with a mad flutter. At odd moments, her legs went suddenly weak, her vision blurred, and all her faculties melted in a strange pang that was like a death pang.

When the men had gone to bed she solaced her ache with tears.

She didn't do her work as well as she used to. Being now particularly anxious not to give Michael any cause for complaint, she spent more time than necessary over those things that usually caught his attention; for the rest, the days weren't long enough. She still dusted very carefully all the old keepsakes on the mantelpiece, those rather ugly old things that had come under her special guardianship after the death of old man Corbier; but she now ran her cloth but rarely, and then hurriedly, over the chairs, the beds, the chests with the fine old iron-work.

Sometimes she sat down with Jo on her lap and stayed like that a long while. When the baby let her rock him in her arms, when he dropped off to sleep against her shoulder, when the warm little breath caressed her cheek, a gentle languor came over her and, forgetful of everything, she still had moments of deep happiness.

Michael took every opportunity to annoy her and harshly show himself the master. One morning he ordered Madeleine, in a tone that did not admit of discussion, to get all of Lalie's clothes ready so she could start going to school right after All-Saints day.

Indeed it was high time; Lalie was past seven; but as there was no one but herself to take her to Saint-Ambroise, Madeleine had managed until now

to keep her at home. She had taught her to read and count, and she had even bought her some copy-books with handwriting models at the top of the pages, for Lalie to learn to use her pen. And Madeleine was delighted because Lalie was already showing the promise of a fine hand.

When school had opened in October, Michael had spoken of sending the little girl to attend classes, but Madeleine had opposed the plan because it was such a long way to go and the bad weather would be coming soon. Michael had given in. And here he was going back on his word, without a single new argument.

"Lalie will go to school, beginning the first Monday of November. Get her things ready."

"And where will I be, the first Monday of November?" thought Madeleine. "All-Saints day will come round in a fortnight, and my contract will be up, and he hasn't yet said a word about renewing it."

Michael was indeed quite silent on the subject, which only increased Madeleine's fears.

One day, however, at table, as he was making plans for the coming year, Michael spoke up bluntly:

"As for you, Madeleine, what have you decided?"

She did not answer but drew away from him, turning her back to poke the fire.

"What are your plans? You haven't told me, so

far, whether you want to stay on here or not.—It's time I knew; I want to have all this business settled at once.—Here's what I have to say: if you decide to stay on, it won't be at the same wages. I mean to cut them down."

He had purposely struck a loud, lordly, disagreeable tone to make it quite clear that he no longer wanted his housekeeper and that he had made his new offer merely to save her face, to let the break come from her instead of him. The men listened in astonishment; Gideon had to make an effort to keep quiet, but his eyes showed anger.

Michael went on: "You are no doubt capable of making a lot of money, but it isn't convenient for me to pay you such high wages."

Madeleine kept her back turned and asked in a dead voice:

"What's your offer?"

He paused, for he had not expected such a direct question. At last he said:

"The girl I hire—will get two hundred francs for the year, no more."

Madeleine turned round at once; facing the three of them, she said:

"Agreed!"

Michael started, opened his mouth to say something; but, meeting the farm-hands' stare, he grew red in the face and replied superciliously:

"All right! My word stands. That's settled, then."

That day Madeleine ate her food with a good appetite, did all her work with the old thoroughness and, when night came, she slept eight hours at a stretch.

But on the morrow the man's attitude was such that all her fears were revived, only the sharper and more pressing for the brief moment's respite.

It seemed to her that she could not possibly stay on at the Moulinettes; no agreement in the world could bind her. No matter how deaf and dumb, how humble and cowardly she might be, she would not be able to escape this insensate enmity.

She who had never been ill in her life, felt herself on the way to illness. She could not eat; she could not sleep; a strange weariness was breaking all her limbs.

One morning, Gideon, who had got up very early, found the hall door open. It puzzled him, and as he went out to investigate, he stumbled over Madeleine sitting on the ground, fighting off a fainting spell.

CHAPTER VIII

NIGHT was falling, an October night as beautiful as a mid-summer evening, but of a more wistful, more intimate, more thrilling beauty. The wind that had been high all through the day, whisking the leaves off the trees, had gone to sleep. Only the tall tree-tops were still a-tremble, shining like copper in the golden haze of the setting sun.

Michael was guessing the hour of day by the length of the shadows. All day long he had worked in the meadow behind the house, pruning the bushy hedges, cutting the heads off the shrubs, hacking away the brambles and the intruding honey-suckle. Now he had come to the goat pasture and was cleaning up all the tough, hasty weed-growths of the summer. With wide strokes of his sickle he felled dry grasses, wall-flowers, the last of the thistles and the rusty stalks of dead ferns.

Every once in a while he straightened up to listen, and his eyes searched the road. Violette was to pass by the Moulinettes on her way back from Saint-Ambroise and he was waiting for her; it was almost time for her to come.

"Only a little while longer! When the mist rises round the pond, she'll be coming in sight."

All his youthful, ardent feelings carried him madly ahead toward her.

At the house, Madeleine's voice rang out. Michael heard it and all at once his temper was roused.

That girl! Why was she staying on at his place? Why couldn't he get rid of her even when her contract was run out? He'd made a new deal, and of course he couldn't think of going back on any deal once it was made.

Still . . . think of how she harmed him in Violette's esteem!

Well, after all, it was largely his own fault. He had been letting the woman take hold of his household too masterfully, right from the start. Now she had naturally enthroned herself and expected to rule the whole place. Well, she wouldn't—just watch and see!

"I'm the master and the only master.—They'll start laughing at me, next thing!—I'll get her to go.—She deserves it—it's plain justice."

He kept saying these things to himself to keep up his resolution. When he had Violette before his eyes, his rancour flamed high, but whenever he was alone he had to keep stirring the flames a little.

There were her three years of devoted service and good fellowship; there was the renewed prosperity of his farm, the happy comfort of his children. And

then perhaps something else, too, that wasn't quite forgotten.

"It's plain justice, no more than plain justice——"

Having finished his pruning, he threw down his sickle, picked up a fork and piled up the rubbish into a great heap; then, in order to destroy all these noxious weeds full of seed, Michael set the pile on fire. A bright flame roared up, biting into the dry fern and the small brush. Then the fire went down a little, and a thick, white smoke billowed from the burning greenery and rose up slowly.

Lalie, who was playing in the front yard, saw the beautiful, high smoke. She ran through the house to the back door.

"Nêne! Nêne! There's a big fire in the meadow; I am going to see it."

Madeleine called out:

"No, you stay here, you'll see it just as well; down there, you might get burned."

Michael heard her and approved of her prudence. But then, right away, he chided himself for his approval and, from a feeling of misconceived pride, he called:

"Lalie, come and see my bonfire!"

It was not a kindly invitation, but a crude defiance shouted very loud so as to carry far. The words passed over Lalie's head, on into the house, and

crashed against Madeleine's heart. Lalie started off at once, calling back:

"Nêne, I'm going; papa said so."

Michael was now raking together the little heaps of dead leaves and dry twigs he had assembled all over the pasture. Every time he flung an armful of the fuel on the fire, it flamed up, crackled prettily and sent up innumerable sparks.

Lalie danced around the fire, clapping her hands. Michael had gathered some early chestnuts and put them for her on a bed of embers that he had raked together at one side of the bonfire. While they were roasting, the child started running back and forth through the smoke.

"Don't go too near," said Michael, "the flame might catch you."

The little girl stopped running and busied herself stirring her chestnuts with a twig.

At the lower end of the meadow there was still a big pile of brush left and Michael went to fetch it; but just as he was raising his pitchfork, he dropped it again and walked up to the road.

Violette was coming.

When she reached him she stopped and let her girl helpers go on ahead.

"Good evening," said she; "you heard me coming?"

"My mind is full of you all day long and when you rise to come toward me, wherever you are, I

hear your step. My heart hears a hundred times farther than my ear."

She threw back her head, offering her swelling throat, and murmured languidly:

"When it comes to paying compliments, there's none can hold a candle to you."

"That's because none feels such tenderness as mine. If you knew how slowly the hours pass when I am far from you!"

She smiled and drew nearer until she touched him.

"I too," she said, "I think of you.—I'm glad I met you to-night; I wanted to tell you that I've found a new servant for you, an elderly woman who can come right away after All-Saints day."

Michael made an angry gesture.

"Oh, about that! I'm in a pretty fix, the way I was caught the other morning!"

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"I made a new agreement, for another year, with the one I've got now."

Violette gave a start as if she had stepped on a thorn and malice began to gleam in her eyes.

"You're joking," she said drily, "you're trying to make me laugh."

"Nothing of the kind, unfortunately!"

"Well, then?—Didn't you promise me?"

"Of course I did, and gladly, too! But there you are,—I never suspected—! I offered ridiculous

wages and she took me up right off. I only did it so as not to hurt her feelings."

"Thank you! You'd sooner have her hurt mine, would you?"

She turned to go away and Michael pleaded:

"Violette!—Violette!—Please!—Don't hold it against me!"

And he added in a sad, cowardly tone: "I made you a promise—I'll try to keep it; I'll find a way."

"It's simple enough and you needn't bother your head: at All-Saints you just hire the servant I've found for you."

"I can't do it! We've made an agreement——"

"Bah! Does that stop you?"

"Yes, it does.—In our family, we've always stuck to our bargains.—But perhaps she'll leave of her own accord: I'd rather have it that way."

"Not I!" declared Violette. "If you really mean to get rid of her, you can find plenty of reasons. In the first place, she's robbing you."

"That's not so!" said Michael.

"Isn't it, though!—Poor fellow!"

She gave him a sort of pitying look and began to relate Boiseriot's ugly tales. But as he shook his head and remained incredulous she grew impatient and declared flatly:

"Anyway, I've got enough of this! If you want me to listen to your compliments, you'll have to get rid of a servant as young as this one."

Michael had taken her hands and held them firmly in his.

"Violette! Violette! All right—it'll be managed somehow. If you'd only say yes, it's you who'd be at the head of my household now; and if there was a servant, she'd be under your orders. Listen to me——"

She tossed her head, but he went on, more pressingly:

"You know how much I love you! If you love me too, why won't you be my wife? Why wait and let our youth go to waste?"

She had no time to answer.

Through the evening quiet a cry rose: a sudden, terrible, agonised, long drawn-out cry of horrible fear and unspeakable pain. And then, almost at once, another, deeper, raucous cry: the cry of a cornered animal that makes ready for a spring.

Michael felt his legs give way under him; he raised a hand and cried in a quaking voice:

"God's curse! My child's on fire!"

He hurled himself forward, broke through the hedge, dashed across the meadow toward the cloud of smoke that eddied around a writhing, living torch.

Madeleine, too, came hurrying through the goat pasture. The child's cry had instantly brought her to her feet, had sped her out of the house and was pushing, carrying her forward with incredible swift-

ness. And from her throat rose that other cry in response, the hoarse cry of the she-wolf howling at death.

Apron in hand, she threw herself on the child, rolled with her on the grass, beat out the flames with wild gesturings, with her skirts, her hands, with all her big body.

And then, with one jerk, she was on her feet. The child writhed in her arms, uttering piercing, heart-rending shrieks.

Michael reached them all a-tremble, his clothes awry. She never even looked at him, but started off on the run.

With bare feet and her hair undone down her back she ran this way and that, aimlessly, bounding hither and thither in a mad zigzag.

As Michael ran after her, impatient to know the worst, she darted off to the pond with the child held high to let the wind cool the burns. A hedge cut her off for a minute; then she was seen darting back again.

Violette had also run into the meadow and was standing beside Michael on the pasture lane. With eyes aflame, Madeleine charged toward the two. They stepped out of her path, knowing that she was crazed and ready to scratch, to kick, to bite. She shot past them, wild-eyed, her hair streaming behind her in the wind, carrying her pitiful, screaming burden into the house.

CHAPTER IX

THE doctor did not come until the next day, at dawn. The child's cries went on inexorably. At times they lost a little of their shrillness, grew fainter, and it seemed as if they were going to subside, but suddenly they rose again, more harrowing than ever.

"Nène! Nène! It hurts! Help me, Nène!"

The doctor examined carefully the little body in pain. The fire had caught at her skirts, probably while the child was kneeling to watch the chestnuts roasting. The cotton smock, already overheated, had flared up like paper, burning away all her hair, scorching her face and neck and hands. The left side was the worst; another second or two, and the whole of her body would have been one great wound.

"She is not in any real danger," said the doctor. "The burns seem to be superficial. But you got to her just in time."

He was a young man with an air of self-importance. He put on bandages but, to Madeleine's way of thinking, he didn't go about it as he should, too hurriedly and too roughly. When he was done, he rubbed his hands as if he were very well satisfied.

"It will be nothing;—painful, of course, but you mustn't be frightened over trifles. Do you hear me, Madame? There you are, all in a tremble, and unnerved—it's foolish! Look at me: am I upset?—Do her screams upset me?—My goodness, one's got to use some self-control!"

Madeleine had resumed her seat by the child's bedside and the doctor was standing behind her, talking and talking, suggesting that he was a widely travelled and learned man.

With his little girl's incessant cries ringing in his ears, Michael had to make an effort to listen to him with some semblance of politeness; he nodded approvingly, even though he heard only bits of disconnected sentences that made no sense to him.

"In Paris . . . over there . . . at the hospital . . . you wouldn't believe it! . . . In the course of my studies . . . In Paris . . . some appalling cases . . . I remember a certain woman . . . burned all over . . . blisters as big as bladders . . . That was at St. Louis' Hospital . . . and don't forget, there was asphyxiation too . . . One of my colleagues suggested picric acid . . . I said: No! . . . I saved her life . . . In the Paris hospitals . . . great, complicated cases . . ."

Madeleine turned round, bristling, and flung into his face:

"Great complicated cases! Great complicated cases! Why don't you heal this one that's little

. . . and simple, so you say! If you know such a lot, why can't you stop her from suffering!"

The young physician laughed out of the corner of his mouth, but all his bragging was cut short. So he went away, saying to Michael:

"She's none too easy to get on with, your old woman, eh?"

As soon as he was gone, Madeleine called Gideon.

"Run over to the Hardilas," she told him, "and fetch Red Julie who casts spells for burns. We've got to try everything."

Michael, coming back, heard her and said:

"What could she do, after the doctor?"

Madeleine neither moved nor answered. She hadn't spoken to him since the accident; she paid no attention whatever to him.

He went on, a little louder:

"The day of witches is past."

As she still refused to answer, he ventured to come quite close to the bed.

"Madeleine, you must be dead tired. I'll take your place for a spell.—I'll hold up her head as well as you and if she wants to be carried around, I'll carry her around. Do you hear me, Madeleine?"

She turned away as she had turned away from the doctor; she said nothing, but her look was so unrelenting that Michael drew back.

The witch of the Hardilas came in the morning;

she was half blind, very old, very dirty and very gruff.

Right away she gave her prescription: three spiders, three slugs, three earth-worms cut in seven pieces, seven ash leaves and seven cloves of garlic; put all this into a little sack and place it under the pillow.

"Do you hear, my dear? Under the pillow."

"Yes, yes, I hear," said Madeleine.

"Well, then! Now you go out, I command you!"

"Where do you want me to go?"

"Go outside of the house. I must breathe on the wounds—and speak words that you mustn't hear. Well, now—go away!"

The old woman was losing her patience; she went to the bed and roughly pulled back the covers. Lalie, who had been easier for a little while, cried out:

"Nêne!"

Madeleine rushed to her:

"I'm here, darling."

"Nêne! She hurt me!"

"No wonder," said Madeleine, instantly roused to wrath. "Why aren't you more careful? If you came to hurt her, you'd better tell me!"

The old woman played the lofty string; she was used to being flattered and she was so much held in fear that she ended by believing in her own powers of sorcery.

She drew back, made weird gestures and mumbled things to herself.

Lalie took fright at this gaunt, ugly old woman who was shaking her claw-like hands, and Madeleine protested:

"That's enough of your bugaboos!"

The old sorceress was so startled, she looked ready to jump to the ceiling. Then she began to yelp:

"Red viper and water lizard! White wehrwolfs! Come, my pets! Black wehrwolfs! Speckled wehrwolfs!"

Madeleine took her out by the door so energetically that the rest of her incantations stuck in her throat for lack of breath.

Michael was coming in from the garden. Madeleine's arms went stiff, and looking him straight in the eye she shouted:

"So it seems that everyone is turning against the child! First the young one, then this old thing! First the doctor, then the witch! I'm fed up on you, all of you! Go away!—Go away!——"

Michael stammered in his amazement:

"But this one—you yourself sent for her!"

She made no reply; she didn't seem to have heard. Her eyes became like steel; she flung out her arms and opened her big hands.

"I don't want anybody here, not anybody! I'll jump at the head of the first one who comes in!"

And as Michael came nearer, she closed the door in his face.

All through a week the house was unapproachable.

The hands ate their meals in Michael's room; they passed in and out by the back door with muffled tread. Madeleine did not trouble about them; she troubled neither about the kitchen, nor about the house, nor about the live stock nor about any of her tasks. As long as the child's complaints kept on, she sat by the bedside, stubbornly, jealously, fiercely; and her eyes were wide and dry.

On the morning of All-Saints, however, as the child had dropped off into a deep sleep, she quietly opened the hall door and entered the men's room. They were finishing their breakfast and Michael had just counted out the farm-hands' wages; he was pouring out some wine to drink to Gideon, who was leaving that day to enter military service.

The men looked at her and found nothing to say. Finally Michael got himself to ask:

"Is she sleeping? She passed a good night, it seemed to me."

He waited anxiously for her answer, but no answer came.

Madeleine turned to Gideon:

"So you are leaving these parts? Where are they sending you, poor boy?"

Gideon answered bravely:

"Not to the ends of the world! I'm going to Angers, to join the dragoons."

"I'll be sorry," she said, "not to see you round here any more."

Michael ventured:

"I hope he'll come to pay us a visit every time he gets a furlough."

Then he placed on the table a little pile of gold pieces.

"Here are your wages, too, Madeleine.—You'll have use for them."

Then for the first time in a week she spoke to him:

"Thank you. I have a very good use for them, indeed."

She took a gold piece and handed it to Gideon.

"You'll be going to Saint-Ambroise, won't you? Well then, will you do me the favor of stopping in at Mme. Blanchevirain's: you'll please pick out the nicest toy she has to amuse a little girl."

Michael was going to protest, but she shrugged her shoulders and stressed her request:

"The nicest toy in the shop! And you'll bring it to me, won't you?"

"I will," said the young man. "You'll have it this evening."

Michael had turned very red, but his pride was beaten and he offered his suggestion timidly:

"We might, at the same time, have the doctor

called here again. I'd like him to look her over once more."

"What for? To hurt her again? Seeing a child in pain doesn't upset him one bit, your fine doctor!"

"Well, we might call in another doctor,—say the old one, of Saint-Ambroise."

"Oh, do as you like," said Madeleine and turned on her heel.

The new doctor came in the afternoon—no rush and fuss about him! He was a timid, sensible little old man without any great reputation. He was of no use in cases of wounds because the sight of blood made him ill. They said that his learning was scanty and that his long practice had not taught him much. But there was this to his credit: if he rarely cured his patients, he hardly ever killed them.

Standing beside the bed of Lalie, who was still sound asleep, he said softly:

"Poor little darling—she's asleep—don't let's wake her. Never wake the sick!—She was burned, you say? Poor little thing, she must have suffered martyrdom.—I won't disturb her. You're using olive oil on the burns, aren't you?"

Madeleine replied with an effort:

"Olive oil, yes,—that's what I use."

She had seated herself by the bedside; her legs felt nerveless; her head was heavy; she felt no pain, on the contrary,—the gentle murmur of the doctor's voice was soothing to her.

"That's quite right.—Go on with it—and take care not to abrase the skin when you apply it. The hands are rather bad, and the left cheek.—Perhaps she'll be all right again—let's hope so.—Such a pretty little girl!—it would be too bad to have her disfigured. She ought to be amused, have her mind occupied now;—and get her to eat well. She'll be up and about again soon—oh, yes, yes, I promise you: she'll pick up very quickly now. It's a pleasure to 'tend these little tots.—How she sleeps! She hasn't rested much these past nights, has she?"

As he turned round for Madeleine's answer, he saw that she too had fallen asleep. Crushed with weariness, she slept with her mouth open, almost without breathing, and she was so white, one might have thought her dead.

The doctor pointed her out to Michael, whispering: "Hush!"—and left the room on tiptoe.

CHAPTER X

IT wasn't long before Lalie's burns stopped pain-
ing and she became her merry little self again.
Nevertheless, the fire had left its ineffaceable marks.
Her hair grew out, her right cheek became white and
normal again, but a great red scar remained on the
left cheek and would never disappear. Her hands,
too, the pretty little hands with the shapely nails,
were covered with a new skin that was too smooth
and without elasticity; the poor little fingers that
used to be so nimble would never again open com-
pletely.

As for Madeleine, she didn't quite recover either
from the shock. It was as if her heart had been
scorched in the fire; part of it dried up and died
off.

Except the children, everything became a matter
of indifference to her. She had resumed her place
at the helm. Without a word Michael submitted
to her cold authority and felt more cowed in her
presence than the farm-hands. She never put any
ill-feeling into her speech with him, but sometimes,
when he behaved most humbly and gently, the

appalling memory flashed through her mind, and then she cast upon the young master with the fickle heart a look that was dry-eyed and unforgiving.

Winter came. Jo had the measles.

CHAPTER XI

BOISERIOR was having his coffee at Violette's home.

They had lunched alone together, as Violette's mother was out on a day's wash in the village.

With all his wile on the alert, Boiseriot was questioning Violette. In every one of his words he laid a snare that could not fail to catch her—yet, so far, she had side-stepped them all, and of course it was useless to try to read her eyes.

"She's a cool one all right!" thought Boiseriot. "I'll never draw her out, darn her!"

He lost patience and said:

"Well now, my dear girl, I'll say it isn't the easiest thing in the world to confess you; I'm not clever enough for the job."

Then he changed his tone from one of complaint to one of attack.

"It would take a pretty shrewd old parish priest to make you tell what's in your mind,—one who's heard all kinds of stories and knows how to unravel his yarn. . . . No young abbé for you . . . eh, little girl?"

Violette gave a startled toss of her head, went pale, and the words came hissing through her teeth:

"Is that what you were trying to get at?"

He looked surprised.

"My goodness, you act as if I'd made you angry!
. . . What did I say? I don't see . . ."

She fell in petulantly:

"Don't play the innocent! . . . So you came to eat at my table just to insult me, did you? You'd better make up your mind that I'm not in a mood to stand it!"

She had got up and was noisily moving about some glasses on the sideboard, while he drummed on the table, waiting for the storm to pass.

"You want to read me a lecture, do you? . . . 'Violette, they're saying this,' and 'Violette, they're saying that!' . . . I don't care! I don't care! I don't care!"

A glass fell down and broke with a clear tinkle. Violette stopped, suddenly calmed; then she took a few dance steps and burst out laughing:

"After all, my friend, you're right: that little abbé wasn't very clever!"

"I don't follow you," said Boiseriot. "You talk as if there was something. . . . I don't know a thing!"

She shrugged her shoulders:

"You don't, don't you!"

She came close to him and her eyes lighted up with a flame of reckless impudence. She would have liked to shout at him:

"Come, now! You're lying! You're always lying! I sometimes do tell the truth.— I have that courage! . . . You don't know a thing, do you? Well then, I'll tell you this: There was a pink little, blond little abbé here, with hair as fine as silk and pretty hands as white as sugar. He saw me often, almost every day. At first he paid no attention to me. But because of his hair and his hands and his innocent eyes, I wanted to wake him up. . . . So I went shaking my skirts around him, and by and by he grew to have that wild look they all get . . . and he came along, just like the others. He came along—yes; only, being tormented with ideas of sinfulness, he got to talking a lot of nonsense and doing foolish things . . . and so he was caught.—He's gone away now, far away somewhere, I don't know where; and I'm left behind with the smirch.—But what do I care!"

Yes, truly, she would have liked to shout this at him, just for bravado. . . .

"You don't know a thing, you say? Then I suppose you came to hear the news?"

"Just as you like.—They say you've lost your two little helpers?"

"It's true, they've left me, and so have my customers,—and, worst of all, so have my lovers."

"Oh!—as for that——"

"It's enough to make me cry my eyes out. But never fear! I'm one of the merry sort!"

"What are you going to do?" inquired Boiseriot.

"Become a nun in a far-away land—and all day long I'll pray for you who are in sore need of it. Or then again—here's another possibility: I'll go and get married!"

"Get married?"

"Yes! since all my lovers desert me, I'll get me a husband! I'll just turn the goods; the wrong side has a lot of wear in it yet. What do you think of my plan?"

"I think you're making sport of me."

She burst into another laugh.

"That's true! Of you as well as the rest of them!"

Boiseriot went on, pursuing his idea.

"But is it true your lovers have deserted you? Doesn't Clarandeau watch out for you on the roads any more? And what of Michael Corbier? Are you sure you've stopped listening to him?"

She looked at him squarely without answering.

"You boasted that you'd have that hired girl at the Moulinettes discharged,—she's there yet! You told me she'd insulted you and so I thought——"

Violette shot a sharp question at him:

"What about you? What's she done to you, that big lump of a girl?"

Boiseriot drank down the last drop of his coffee and smacked his lips.

"It's real good coffee, this is!" he said. "You

know how to make it. You're all ready to settle down to housekeeping, I'd say!"

Violette kept her mocking eyes on him. He began teasing her and pitying her future husband.

"He'll have to be a brave man!—You'll lead him a dance, right enough!—There'll be five hundred devils let loose in his house. I'd like to know the poor fellow.—Perhaps it'll be Clarandeu?"

"Perhaps," said Violette. Her face was set in an unreadable mask.

"If he got a Government job—but those things take time! Besides, he drinks.—Perhaps it'll be Michael Corbier?"

"Perhaps! It'll no doubt be either one of those two—there isn't another one that's brave enough!—Do you know, your former boss isn't at all bad!—If I take him, that hired girl will get out sure enough, and then you'll have your wish."

Boiseriot rose.

"Are you joking, or are you speaking the truth, seriously? I never can tell, with you. If there's anybody can guess what you're going to do——"

"... he'll have to be cleverer than you, as you've said before. Well, he'll have to be cleverer than myself, too.—You're going? Good-bye, then!—When you come again, perhaps you'll have better luck; I may have some news for you then."

So he left her.

Along the road Boiseriot thought:

"She'll marry.—What else can she do? She'll take one of those two purblind fellows who know nothing. The one she jilts will think he's in hell, but it's the other one who'll be there, sure enough. I'm going to have some fun!"

And at her window, Violette was thinking:

"I'll get married.—What else can I do? I'll have to take either one of those two fools, who're both blind and deaf. Afterward, I'll manage my life all right."

Having cleared the table, she sat down at her sewing machine. Slowly she began to spin a silken thread on to the bobbin. And slowly, too, she spun her thoughts; but being of a coarse and short fibre, they got tangled and knotted and would not run smoothly, like a straight, orderly skein.

Regret had planted its teeth in her. Why had she played at devilling that young priest? And later, when he had grovelled at her feet like one possessed, why had she yielded to his strange supplications? Had she loved this youth with the pink complexion and the dreamy eyes? . . . Their recklessness had made a scandal inevitable.

And now she was being shunned by everyone in the village. The affair was hushed up, of course, because the Church was involved; everything possible was done to keep it from the ears of Protestants and Dissenters; nevertheless, tongues had been wagging at Chantepie.

The parents of her two young helpers refused to let them work with her any more. Her Catholic customers had looked for another dressmaker. Even her suitors no longer cared to be seen with such a compromising girl.

What could she do? Poverty was on the way. It had not yet knocked at the door, but it would, to-morrow.

Violette turned her thoughts over and over. There was the city, to be sure, always ready to welcome girls of her kind. The city! Fine houses—soft silks—bright lights—festive gatherings.—Her dreams rose up and up like a flight of skylarks.

Yes, but she'd have to take chances, risk destitution! While here, if she married a fool——

If she married a fool with a sufficient competence, the road would not be wide, but at least it would be level;—and it would be easy enough, any time she wished, to skip off for a bit along some tempting by-way.

If John Clarandeau had obtained an allowance from the insurance company, and a good Government job.—But no, he'd never be anything but a crippled pauper anyhow.

Then, what of the other one, Michael Corbier? He came of a substantial family; he had broad acres in the sun.—He was a Dissenter—so much the better! She would bring him into the Church and herself return to the fold by his side. She would

return, not as a humble penitent despised by all, but proudly, with her head held high. Making such a convert would be indeed a victory and a great feather in her cap; she would be honoured among women throughout the parish.

"I'll marry him. I'll have a big house, with people to work under my orders.—I'd better not wait."

The silken thread was spun on the bobbin; the sewing machine was ready for work. But Violette pushed away the unfinished dress. From an untidy closet she fetched a box of scented notepaper and, resting it on the shelf of the machine, she hurriedly wrote to Michael Corbier.

CHAPTER XII

ONE Sunday Madeleine took the children to Le Coudray. Her mother had been somewhat ailing during the winter and her rheumatism was still keeping her from work for days at a stretch. She blamed Madeleine for not having come oftener to see her, and then she said:

"There's the little matter of my allowance, too.—You're none too prompt about it, my dear! Your sisters were ahead of you, this time, paying me their shares. Seeing the state I'm in, I do need some help."

Madeleine blushed and took the blame:

"You're right; I deserve to be scolded. But I'm going to give you your money to-day; I've got it right here, Mother."

She drew from her purse first a gold piece, then a silver piece.

"Here are your twelve francs," she said.

The mother looked at her in surprise. Usually Madeleine added something to the agreed sum, because she was the eldest and earned more money than her sisters.

"So you're not in funds just now, are you?" the

mother remarked. "You must be spending a lot of money!"

Madeleine blushed again; she opened her purse, took out a five-franc piece, then one of two francs, and finally decided on a one-franc piece.

"I am kind of short," she replied; "however, I can give you this."

She might have said:

"No, indeed, I'm not in funds! I've been giving money to my brother, though he had promised never to ask me for any again.—Then there are the children that you see there: I've bought them so many things that my wages are all spent."

But she would have found it very difficult to say this last thing: it was a secret preciously guarded.

Lalie was on her lap; she hugged the child a little tighter.

"Is this little dear the one who was burned?" asked Mme. Clarandeau. "I hadn't seen her since. She must have suffered a great deal!"

"Oh, if you knew! If you knew!"

That started Madeleine's tongue going. She told all about the accident, all about the visit of the young doctor, about that of the old practitioner and about the anger of Red Julie; then she related other troubles: colds, frostbite and Jo's measles that had looked bad for a while.

Her subject carried her away and it seemed as if she'd go on forever.

Mme. Clarandean smiled:

"You love them as if you were their mother."

"Yes," said Madeleine, "I do."

"You've been there four years now. You're likely to stay there a long time since Corbier isn't marrying again. You must have your hands full."

"I have, but I like it. The worst of it is that I have so little time to take the children out. You see how it is: even to-day I must hurry back early.—I'd better leave you now; it's time."

"So soon?"

"Yes, I'm alone with just one hand. Michael went away early, I don't know where, to town perhaps, because he was all dressed up. I've got to be home to see to everything."

"Just wait a minute till I get the children some bread and jam."

Madeleine's eyes lighted up and all her face thanked her.

"You're spoiling them, Mother," she said. "They'll keep at me to bring them here again!"

Without another word she hunted in her purse and put one more coin on the table. Then they took their leave.

On the way home the children skipped to right and left, munching their bread and jam. Madeleine went leading them along, smilingly.

For some time now she had begun again to feel happy; her old fortitude and even temper were be-

ing restored little by little. "You're likely to stay there a long time," her mother had said. A long time! Why, she was there for always!

"Jo! come on, darling!"

The child had stopped at a cross path and stood up by a low fence.

"Look, Nêne!"

Madeleine looked and saw a young girl hurrying along, weeping; she recognised her little sister Tiennette, and didn't have time to be surprised: the girl vaulted the fence at once to tell her troubles.

"I'm going home!—I've stood it long enough!—I'm not a thief!—The rest,—let it pass, but not that! I won't ever go back there! Last year I was all right there, but, at present, I don't know what's come over them!"

Madeleine took her hands and drew her to the side of the road.

"What's happened? Tell me!"

"I'm not a thief!" the girl kept saying; "I won't have them look as if they thought I was! There isn't a thing they can bring up against me!—"

"Calm yourself—sit down here."

They sat down on the edge of the ditch, but it was quite a while before Tiennette was herself again. After a bit, Madeleine began to grasp the situation.

Tiennette had been hired out to a Catholic farmer at a hamlet near Chantepie. This was her second year at the place. At first all had gone well between

her, the masters and the other servants in the hamlet. But at All-Saints some new farm-hands had come and made mischief all round. They had started by keeping aloof from her because she was the only Dissenter among them; then they had spread all sorts of gossip about her: she'd been seen going to this place, doing that thing—misbehaving herself——

“There’s a sorry specimen hanging around there a lot now, that Boiseriot who was discharged at the Moulinettes.—They listen to him because he’s such a devout Catholic.—I believe it’s he who invents all the talk against me.”

“You may be sure of it,” said Madeleine. “He’s a wicked man and not to be trusted.”

“From the day he came to the neighbourhood, at All-Saints, my mistress has been horrid to me, and things have been going from bad to worse. They’re openly on guard against me now; when I’m left alone in the house, they lock up everything! I can’t stand it! Yesterday a pair of scissors got mislaid, and this morning, while I was at rosary prayers, they opened my chest and went through all my things! Would you believe it? Do I look like a thief? I told them what I thought and here I am. Mamma can go for my things if she wants to; but as for me, I’ll never set foot in their house again!”

Tiennette burst again into sobs; Madeleine did what she could to comfort her.

"Tiennette, come now! Tiennette! There's no reason to get into such a state."

"Oh, but you don't know!" sobbed the girl. "He'll hear about it and then what'll he think?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Why—why, Gideon. He's away. I can't talk to him and defend myself. They're capable of writing to him to blacken my character; they tried it once before! And didn't they come and tell me he was sick in hospital? And it wasn't true at all, as I found out!"

Madeleine thought it her duty to say severely:

"Why do you listen to that Protestant?"

Tiennette threw back her head, ready to defend herself against this new attack:

"So you're against him too? What has he done, can you tell me, that you all think less of him than of the others?"

Madeleine replied, this time with great gentleness:

"No, dear, I'm not against him; in fact I like him very much."

"Well, then! What's wrong, since we love each other for ever and ever?—since we're going to be married!"

"A Dissenter marry a Protestant! It would be the first time it happened!"

"What's wrong about it, I'd like to know? What difference is it to you? What difference is it to

Mother and Fridoline and John and all the rest of you? If he claims me for his own, you haven't a thing to say about it!—If he doesn't worry about the difference of religion, that's his affair!—When he gets his discharge from the army, I'll be ready: I've pledged myself!"

Madeleine let her go on and it saddened her to find her little sister too, now, as well as her brother, so careless about things that, to her own way of thinking, were so eminently worthy of respect; but she was surprised, also, and a little moved, at seeing this young love rise sovereign above all else.

"Yes," continued her sister, "we both pledged ourselves.—But now—what if he should be made to believe that I'm a thief? Oh, Madeleine, I don't know what to do! I'm so miserable!——"

Madeleine gripped her little sister's shoulders very tenderly.

"Come, come, dear! Stop crying and wipe your eyes! There, now!—I know the cause of all this trouble: it's an old grudge, 'way back when—oh, well, there are old things you don't know about.—I'm going to write to Gideon myself; as soon as he knows that Boiseriot was your neighbour at the farm, he'll understand. I promise you he won't doubt you for a single moment."

"Really and truly?"

"I promise you. You've been making a mountain

of a molehill, you poor child! That isn't being a sensible girl, now, is it?"

For a while they said nothing further, so that the children ventured to come closer.

Tiennette's smile came back through her tears as she patted Jo's curly head.

"He was the first to see me, the little darling," she said to Madeleine.

Somehow the child brought back a recollection through the mist of her present trouble, and she blurted out:

"This Boiseriot certainly is a wicked sort of rascal. He doesn't like you any better than he does me, it would seem."

"Why do you say that?" asked Madeleine anxiously.

"Day before yesterday I heard him talking to Jules the natural, telling him the news—and there was one piece of news for you, that no doubt you didn't like to hear.—But, of course, you must have known it long before Boiseriot!"

Madeleine's fingers tightened on Tiennette's shoulders.

"Jules? I haven't seen him lately—he hasn't come around. . . . What news do you mean? I haven't any news——"

"Is that so? At Chantepie everybody's talking about it."

"But go on, tell me! What is it?"

White as death, Madeleine was panting for breath. But the little sister didn't notice it and delivered her news lightly, almost scoffingly:

"Well, it's this: that poor fool, Michael Corbier, is going to marry Violette, the dressmaker. The thing's to take place toward early summer. This very day he's supposed to buy her engagement ring."

Only then Tiennette felt her sister's hands glide off her shoulders. She turned around: Madeleine lay against the slope of the ditch in a faint.

CHAPTER XIII

ALL at once, Madeleine made up her mind that Lalie should be sent to school. The notion struck her unexpectedly; a queer notion, for her; but she had had many others as queer since the bad news.

She had suddenly thought herself very guilty in keeping such a big girl—going on eight years now—from getting the proper schooling.

“Off to school with you, my dear! It’s high time! I’ve taught you to read and to make your letters, but for giving you any of the higher instruction, I’m not studied enough! So, off to school you go,—or you’d blame me later.”

Then, too, she was afraid of being blamed when the Stranger should have taken her place;—afraid of being called less sensible, less vigilant than she. So she decided not even to wait for the Easter term, which was near.

But she wanted the little girl to be fitted out all new and beautifully. And as for using the household money for that—why, of course not!

So she went back to the savings bank and drew out, in a lump, all that remained there: just one hundred francs. Then, while she was in town, she

did all her shopping so that on the following day, which was Monday, she could take the little girl to school.

The two of them set out early, Lalie trotting ahead. What a pretty dress it was, bought ready made from a town dressmaker! What a pretty dress, and what a nice little frilly lunch basket! Madeleine was swelled with pride. Her heart was wrung—it always was now—but one thought gave her solace:

“Lalie—she’ll never forget me. Whatever happens, when she thinks back to the early years, she’ll say: ‘The first time I went to school, it was Madeleine took me there, leading me by the hand.’—That’s a thing one can’t forget.”

When they reached Saint-Ambroise, Madeleine bought a big slice of shortbread and a slice of meat loaf, and then some chocolate and chocolate almonds.

“You’ll eat the shortbread first with the meat, then the jam sandwich. And you’ll give some of the candy to the other little girls, so they’ll like you.”

Madeleine knocked at the principal’s door to present Lalie and give the necessary information.

The principal appeared. She was an elderly spinster in a plain black dress. She asked them in; Madeleine left her wooden shoes at the door, but Lalie stepped forth with her new clogs and almost

took a tumble because the floor was as polished as a window pane.

The principal took a sheet of paper and wrote down what Madeleine said:

"Her name is Eulalie Corbier—born at the Moulinettes, Nov. 27. She's only seven, but misfortune didn't wait for her to grow up:—her mother is dead."

The teacher said calmly:

"I know. I had her mother in my class. She was a good pupil, too."

"I'm sure she was," replied Madeleine, "and this child will be just as clever—and make you proud of her. Oh, Mademoiselle, I wish you'd take good care of her!"

The principal had finished her writing and looked up, rather surprised.

"We take good care of all our pupils," she said.

Madeleine blushed.

"I know you do," she stammered. "I have heard your school praised on all sides, I assure you, Mademoiselle! It's only—just—that this little girl is not quite like the others."

The teacher smiled a little, ever so little!—but her eyes on Madeleine remained calm and cold.

Then she, too, had her say, in a very few words; and there was neither harshness nor gentleness in her voice:

"You've come too soon or too late. There are

only three school openings: the first in October, the second in January, and the third at Easter. However, as this child is past the age, we will take her—although in doing so I am going beyond the rules.”

Then she rose and led Madeleine and Lalie to the door, saying:

“You’ll excuse me, I have some work to do—let the little girl go and play with the other children.”

When the door was shut Madeleine felt distressed. She leaned over the little girl and whispered:

“Lalie, would you like to come back home?”

Lalie was choking down sobs herself and did not answer.

“If you’d rather, darling, we’ll just go back home.—Come, let’s go!”

She straightened up, took the child by the hand and walked towards the gate. But as she got there, someone was just passing it to come in. It was a very young girl, neither tall nor pretty, with a pale little face and squinting eyes.

“How do you do?” she said. “Are you bringing me a new pupil?”

As Madeleine looked perplexed, she explained:

“I am the assistant teacher—she’ll be in my class.”

And without more ado she stooped down and kissed Lalie.

“How do you do, dear! Are you glad you’re coming to school? I’ll give you a pretty book, with

pictures in it!—And we're going to have lots of fun together, you'll see! What's your name, dear?"

"Her name is Eulalie," said Madeleine.

"Eulalie, do you like to play with dolls? Or at hide and seek? I'll show you a pretty 'ring-around' dance.—Oh, and what a beautiful dress you have, Eulalie! I'd like to have one just like it! And oh, look at your lunch basket! Who gave you such a pretty basket?"

Lalie smiled, but never raised her eyes from the ground. Madeleine said:

"Go on, don't be so bashful, Lalie! Answer Mademoiselle."

"Come, answer me, won't you? I'm not a wicked person who'd hurt nice little girls!—Come, where did you get this pretty basket?"

"Nêne gave it to me."

"Nêne?"

"She means me—that's what she calls me," said Madeleine. "She's lost her mother; I've brought her up, and her little brother too."

The assistant teacher picked up the child in her arms and held her close; as she noticed the scar on Lalie's cheek, she asked:

"What has happened to her?"

"She was burned," said Madeleine. "She's had a lot of bad luck, poor angel.—See, her hair hasn't all grown out yet and her poor little hands won't ever get right again."

The teacher's pale little face turned quite white and her tender squinting eyes filled with tears. Madeleine had to wipe her own eyes.

"It wasn't my fault, I can assure you, Mademoiselle; I wouldn't want you to think so, because it wouldn't be justice. If they'd only listened to me, this thing wouldn't have happened,—so I don't have to blame myself for it. You see, Mademoiselle, I'm fond of the child—I can't tell you how fond!—A person does get fond of a child so quickly, isn't that so?—I'm glad you're going to take her in your class. I know you'll watch over her. Don't let her run too much and get overheated, will you? She has all she needs for her lunch. She'll remember anything you teach her; she's clever, let me tell you! She knows how to read and as for writing—well, you'll see how beautifully she can write! I'm not very educated, especially not in arithmetic; or else I'd have taught her a lot more. She'll grow fond of you, Mademoiselle; you won't have to scold her, I'm sure! Besides, it wouldn't be right to be hard with a poor motherless mite——"

Five or six little girls had come running from the far end of the yard, with eyes and ears wide open. Madeleine cried softly.

The teacher covered the poor little deformed hands with kisses and cried too; big, bright tears ran down undisturbed over her white face.

"You needn't be afraid," she said; "I'll watch

over her; I'll love her quite as much as the others, and perhaps a little more."

Then she dried her eyes and her gentle smile returned.

"We mustn't cry," she said, "we aren't being sensible! That isn't the way to make children feel at home and comfy!"

Turning to the yard, she called:

"Jeanne! Elise!"

Two pretty, bright-looking little girls ran up to her.

"Come here!—We've got a new pupil, and her name is Eulalie.—Give her a kiss and take her by the hand.—That's right! . . . I'll carry the basket. We'll go and look the school over, and then we'll play." In a whisper she advised Madeleine:

"You'd better go now; good-bye, and don't worry!"

She went away down the yard, chatting brightly with the three little girls. Suddenly Madeleine called:

"Lalie!"

Lalie turned round, hesitating whether to run to her or stay. Madeleine had not moved from the spot and she was frantically wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

"Lalie! Good-bye, darling!"

The young teacher raised her hand and laughingly motioned her to "go away! go away!" But as

Madeleine still would not move, she took the children with her into the school-house.

Only then did Madeleine start off. She went away at a quick pace, almost at a run; then, little by little, she slowed; her feet dragged; she stopped.

Had she said all she had meant to say?—How stupid of her, now! She had forgotten to tell the teacher not to fail making Lalie put on her cape after school!—What if Lalie grew homesick? What would the teacher do then?—What if she should start crying? Wouldn't it be better to take her home right now?—

Madeleine walked back toward the school. Class had begun; she did not dare pass through the gate into the yard, so she stayed outside, on the road, and sat down on a stone at the foot of the school wall.

The voices from the two classes came vaguely to her ears. From one classroom there came a sort of even murmur, a hum of low voices. The other roomful of children was noisier; wooden shoes shuffled about, pencil boxes clattered to the floor; sweet little voices recited the alphabet after a deeper voice that for all its lower tone was yet young and flexible; and all at once there were peals of laughter.

"They're having a good time of it, the tots," thought Madeleine. "I hope they're not making fun of Lalie. Perhaps that's why they laugh so much——"

She got up and moved over directly under the young teacher's classroom windows.

A merry miller passed by and began to tease her. Then Bouju came along, driving a cart—that same Bouju who had asked her in marriage not so long ago. He stopped his horse to wish her a good day and inquire after Mme. Clarandeau, Tiennette and all the family.

Madeleine answered straight and quick, in as few words as possible. It annoyed her not to hear the voices from the classroom any more.

When Bouju went on his way, the school bell rang for recess. Madeleine ran to the gate, but the young teacher, having seen her, came quickly toward her:

"Don't let her see you," she whispered. "You would have been wiser to go away.—Everything is going along nicely. I think she'll soon feel quite at home with us. Besides, she's already a big girl, and sensible.—See, there she is, dancing in the round with the others.—But hide yourself, please!"

Madeleine returned to the road; the teacher hurried back to the children and joined in their round dance right beside Lalie.

"Now it's your turn, dear . . . your turn to stand in the middle! Whom are you going to kiss?"

Lalie came up to her bashfully, and when the teacher bent down, she threw her little arms around her neck.

"Lalie! Lalie! don't forget your cape, after school!"

All heads turned round. Who was that person of whom only the upper part of the face could be seen above the wall? The teacher shrugged her shoulders; Lalie smiled and blushed—and it was she who was the first to start the game again.

The blonde hair and the swollen eyes disappeared from above the wall.

"She feels at home already.—I'm glad!—She's put me out of her mind already.—How she hugged the teacher!—I was so worried, and now it's all right.—All the better! I'm glad, very glad!"

All along the way to the Moulinettes Madeleine kept mumbling: "I'm glad!"—the while big tears were blinding her.

Of that first school day Lalie made a whole long tale:

"If you knew, Nêne, how much fun we're having! Teacher made me sing; she says I'll be at the head of the class."

"Do you like her already, your teacher?"

"Indeed I do! She's lovely! When you kiss her, her hair smells good. She gave me a paper rose."

"Like the one I bought for you at the Saint-Ambroise fair?"

"Oh, much prettier."

Madeleine thought:

"It's lucky the young lady knew so well how to get round Lalie!——"

And her heart was heavy.

As she was getting supper, she saw the little girl very busy looking at herself in a mirror; she crept noiselessly near: Lalie was trying to squint, in order to look like the teacher.

The following afternoon it was the same tale of joy.

"You haven't once been scolded?" asked Madeleine.

"Scolded? Why scolded?"

"And all those hours, you don't once get a little homesick? Don't you think of Jo?—nor of me?"

"Never!"

Madeleine did not ask her anything more.

On Wednesday she hunted up some reason for keeping Lalie out of school, but there was such weeping and wailing that she had to let her go.

Thus the week passed. Lalie talked about nothing but her school, her teacher. At night she talked of them in her dreams, and this caused Madeleine a hidden pang of which she was ashamed.

The Monday following, she had a flash of guilty joy. She had gone toward Saint-Ambroise, about four o'clock, to wait for Lalie. When the little girl came in sight with her basket on her arm, Madeleine saw that she was walking wistfully and that her eyes were red.

With a bound she was beside her and picked her up in her arms:

"What's the matter? You've been crying! Did she scold you?"

Lalie burst into sobs.

"Oh, she scolded you, she scolded you, did she?"

Lalie shook her head:

"No! No!"

But Madeleine, without listening, went on hugging and petting her, setting her down and picking her up again.

"Oh, the wicked girl!—She hurt you!"

"No! No!"

"What did she do to you? Tell me! I'll give her a good scolding!—Such a wicked girl!—And you won't have to go to her school any more."

Lalie struggled until she managed to slip to the ground; then she cried in high dudgeon:

"She's not wicked! I won't let you scold her. Who told you she hurt me?"

"But here you are, still crying!"

"I'm crying on account of the girls—they won't be good—they won't learn to read.—She said she'd go away and we'd never see her any more!"

Madeleine stood perplexed, with empty arms dangling, looking at the child, and her heart was torn with jealousy.

Next morning she announced that Lalie was look-

ing out of sorts, that she'd been coughing all night,
and that she shouldn't go to school.

The child set up a yell, but Madeleine stuck to
her guns and had her way.

CHAPTER XIV

YOUR mother isn't very strong, these days; her rheumatism has been at her again. She's complaining of you because you don't come to see her."

It was a little old man from Le Coudray, passing by the Moulinettes, who was giving to Madeleine the news of her home village.

She shook her head and said with a touch of impatience:

"But I haven't got time! On top of my work, I've got to look after the children. Isn't my brother close by her at present?—And my sisters, with almost all their Sundays free, can't they go over to Le Coudray?"

"You are the eldest," said the old man; "you ought to be the first to be the prop and stay of your mother."

And then, for his own satisfaction, he launched into a long homily full of bitterness.

"Old people are always in the wrong.—What right have they on earth?—So long as they're able to work, well and good!—but after that, they'd better die right away."

Madeleine interrupted him:

"All right! you can tell my mother that I'll go to

see her one of these days. Tell her not to worry and take good care of herself, so she'll be well again when I come."

The old man promptly took her up:

"Take good care of herself! How can she? Where will she get the money to buy what she needs, can you tell me that?"

Madeleine blushed:

"I know I'm a little behindhand.—Ask her please to forgive me."

"To my way of thinking, she's already forgiven more than she should.—I happen to know that this is the third time she's reminded you. For my part, I wouldn't have her patience—no, ma'am!"

Madeleine's cheeks grew scarlet.

"Well, if you'll wait a minute, I'll fetch the money now, and you can give it to her."

She opened the door of the wardrobe, where the money drawer was, and said half to herself:

"It's only that I'm not in funds myself, right now——"

She emptied her purse in the drawer.

Could it be possible? All that remained was 12 francs, exactly what she wanted to send her mother. These last weeks she had spent and spent, and now—here was the last of her store. What was to be done? Oh, well, Fridoline would have to contribute a little more, Tiennette would have to do without a new ribbon! She simply couldn't spare any of her

last few pennies! How could she refuse the children any wish, now that she was going to lose them? Not she!

She closed the purse, closed the drawer, closed the wardrobe. And to the astonished old man, she said:

"On second thought, my mother will have to wait a little. I'll bring her the money myself, as I want to have a talk with her."

CHAPTER XV

NOW, what can this one be after again?" Just as the old man had gone, Madeleine saw her brother coming.

His face was very red and his eyes glittered. He trudged in and sank into a chair.

"H'lo, there, Madelon!"

She answered coldly:

"Hello yourself! What is it you want?"

He laughed:

"As if you didn't know!"

"I don't."

He winked and made a gesture as of counting money on the table.

"Money! More money! You've come at the wrong time: I'm not handing out any more money."

"I'm not begging for a gift, I'm asking for a loan. And you needn't be afraid—you know me: I'm your brother!"

Madeleine shrugged her shoulders.

"Give you money so you can go to the wineshop and get drunk again, as you are right now? Or so you can take it again to that hussy? Is that what you want it for? Well, no and no and no! I'm through!"

Trooper got up, instantly roused to anger.

"What I've got to say is that you're talking rot, Madeleine, and that you've deeply offended me. I'll never forget your words; they'll stand between us for life. You talk like a person without heart or brain, who's never loved anybody."

That made her turn on him in a flash.

"Shut up! Get out! You're driving me mad, all of you! Be still!—You say I don't love anybody? Well, look out there, in the garden!—Do you see those children? You've got two of them right there before your eyes, whom I love! And I think they're as worth while as anybody, as worth while as the hussy who's making you crazy and wicked and cowardly!—You make me laugh with your airs, the lot of you! Sitting around and chanting: 'We love Peter or Paul or Mary or Jane—poor Madeleine, she doesn't understand—— Is that so! I don't understand, don't I!—Without looking any farther, take those children: I'd go through hellfire for them! Does that count for anything with you fools?—Just look at them, you great big idiot, you!'"

With both her hands flat on his chest, she pushed her brother to the door.

"Look at them! I want you to look at them! I should think they're as lovely to look at as your Violette, any day; and they won't betray me as she has betrayed you! And now they're going to be snatched away from me, and who'd be doing that fine piece of work but your Violette!"

"That's not true!"

"Not true? Have you lost your wits altogether? —The wedding is going to take place in three weeks."

Trooper fell back aghast and words of utter misery came droning from his big chest.

"Madeleine, the curse of God is on my life!"

"Is there any blessing on mine? But who cares? Not you, at all events! All you care about is Violette!—Get out of my sight!—You'd give her my money, would you? And she'd be mean enough to take it, too! Anyhow, it isn't my money—it belongs to those children out there. As it is, your jade has stolen quite enough from them!—I hate her! You don't know how I hate her! You don't know anything! There was that little girl, the prettiest in the county, the prettiest in the world, and the cleverest—Lalie! And all through your Violette I almost saw her killed—burned alive! And now, as if that wasn't enough, she's going to take her from me! She's going to take Lalie, she's going to take Jo, she's going to take everything!—Everything I've taught them she'll say was a lie! She'll change their religion, she'll change their hearts, she'll wipe even my name from their memory! Damnation! how I hate her! And you who dare talk to me about her—get out! Get out!"

Retreating before her, Trooper had reached the

threshold, but he heard not a word she said. In his drunken eyes the flame of madness burned.

He threw up his one arm and his powerful hand opened and clutched, opened and clutched like an iron claw, again and again, as he cried:

“The curse of God is on my life! If I meet that man—God pity him! I’ll swing for him!”

CHAPTER XVI

MICHAEL returned from Chantepie where he had attended to the last formalities. Everything was settled: he would be baptised on the Sunday before the wedding. The priest had consented to do the thing simply, quietly, without pomp, without parade of victory, and Michael was glad of it. He told his joy to Madeleine, whom he was now keeping posted about everything. She answered merely a word or two in a tone of polite indifference.

Then he turned to the children:

"I didn't forget you," he said. "Here, Jo!"

He handed the baby a bagful of sugar almonds.

"You, too, Lalie! See what I've got!"

Madeleine stopped her work while Lalie came to her father, all curiosity.

"Look at this box!—Did you ever see such a pretty one?"

He set on the table a little work box covered with blue plush and opened it with a tiny key.

"See, it's fitted out with everything necessary for sewing.—And the name that's marked here,—can you read it?"

The little girl spelled out:

"Eu-la-lie. That's my name!"

Lalie passed the box to Madeleine, who opened it and immediately looked for the name. There it was, on a little square of finely sewed-in linen, embroidered in coloured thread,—and not badly done.

Madeleine pinched her lips and her eyes grew hard and strange. Nervously she closed the box, opened it again, closed it—click! click!—And all at once her clumsy fingers went through the cardboard, breaking the cover, crushing the whole box.

“Well, now!” she said, “I’ve broken it!—It wasn’t well made; I’ll buy you a better one.”

Then she took the two children by the hand and went out of the house with them.

The earth was resting under the clear sky. Night had not yet fallen, but through this Sunday twilight there came no sound of men at work in the fields. The wind was dead; there was neither stress nor effort anywhere. All living things were at rest.

Madeleine had led the children out to the pond and had seated herself with them under the sleeping branches of the big oak.

Peace pervaded everything around. The children did not play; they moved gently and asked unexpected questions.

Madeleine gave them slow, dreamy answers.

She had come to this spot as on a pilgrimage. Under this same oak tree, on a day just like this, a great emotion had filled her heart to overflowing. Joy had been hers then and, by the grace of youth

and the illusion of a nascent love, the happy hours in store lay like a gleaming, endless rosary before her. Now she was broken; now she dared no longer look ahead; now she had come to say good-bye.

Ten days more and Corbier would be married. One short week was all that was left for her at the Moulinettes. One week!—and then go away!—away from Lalie, away from Jo;—a new life to set out on!—Death would be sweeter!

Oh, but it couldn't be true, it must be a bad dream! She'd wake up, be tortured no more; she'd find Lalie's head on her breast—and right there, from the little bed alongside of hers, Jo would say with laughing eyes:

"Nêne, you've been sleeping and sleeping, ever so long!"

No, this dreadful thing couldn't possibly happen! She'd pray—the God of mercy wouldn't let it happen.—He'd cast a rock in the path of the crushing wheel;—He'd hurl the threatening chariot into the ditch by the wayside;—surely there'd be some accident, some unforeseen salvation!—

"Nêne, what are the clouds made of? Where do they go?"

"They are God's little sheep going to pasture."

The clear sky was spread out like a beautiful meadow after haying; little billows floating across it here and there made the blue dome seem low and close.

Jo said, pointing aloft:

"Nêne, the moon isn't very high up, is it?"

"Nêne," said Lalie, "I can see things on the moon!"

"That's a little man you're seeing," replied Madeleine; "a wee little man, and he's very old. He's carrying a bundle of brushwood on his back to bake his bread."

"Nêne," inquired Jo, "what is behind the clouds?"

"There's Time," answered Madeleine; "that's where God lives."

"Where is Paradise, Nêne?" asked Lalie.

"My darling, we can't any of us see it while we're alive, but those of us who don't love sin go there when they die."

"But, Nêne," said Jo, "how can they climb up and stay up there, so high in the air?"

"They have no trouble at all—it's difficult to explain these things."

Lalie pointed to the quiet water that mirrored the deep blue of the sky and the billowing little clouds.

"Look, Nêne! there's another Time at the bottom of the water!"

"That's the nether world," said Madeleine.

"Are there people in that too?"

"Yes," said Madeleine, "there are."

"Nêne," said Jo, "but they can't be comfy down there!"

Old stories told her by that half crazy old aunt came to Madeleine's lips; but they frightened children, and therefore Madeleine thought them wicked; so she said only those things that were part of her faith.

"There are three worlds:—the world above which is good; the middle world—that's ours, and it's both good and evil;—and the nether world—God save our souls! It's a poisonous pit: evil rises from it like a cloud of black smoke.—There are three worlds, each one unlike the other two. We know only one; in the other two things aren't the same; nobody can understand; our eyes won't tell us, nor our ears."

She spoke gently and her grief was appeased. As night came on, a great, pitying calm descended from on high.

"When we are dead, we go either above or below, according to justice. Those up above are the people whose hearts were loving: they love us still and watch over us."

"Do you mean they see us?" asked Lalie.

"They see us. So, my little darlings——"

She paused, not knowing how to put into words the thought that welled to her heart.

"For you, there is help above: your mother is in Paradise and watching over you. She loves you—nobody can love you as she loves you—nobody!"

The children were silent and wide-eyed. Madeleine went on thinking aloud, and her words rose like a prayer.

"She's watching over you.—She'll know well enough that I love you, too. Lord, let her be of succour to me!—If I must go away, all I ask is that she keep them from forgetting me."

"But you won't go away, Nêne!" said Jo.

"Do you mean you want to die?" asked Lalie.

She made no answer.

"If you died, would you go up there, too?"

"I don't know."

"You'd have to go up there,—otherwise how would you manage to watch over us?"

Madeleine drew the two children to her breast.

"When I go away, perhaps I mayn't be able to watch over you any more. I'm not your mother, you see; I'm—no, I'm not your mother. Your mother is dead. She was good, that little mother of yours—ah, much better than me! And she was lovely to look at!—There never will be a lovelier mother.—It's her you must love best of all, darlings—better than me, better than anybody!"

She spoke slowly and in a low voice so that her words might make a deep, lasting impression upon the children.

"You can love all the others also; you can love me a lot—that isn't forbidden! But let your mother be first always—I won't be jealous.—Yes, you may

love me—and when you're grown up you may say: 'She wasn't our mother, but we remember her all the same.'—That'll be my share, and a plenty."

Lalie, whose thoughts were again in great labour, asked:

"You're not our mother—nor our aunt, nor our cousin—and here you're talking of going away. Well then, what are you?"

"What I am? What I am?"

Jo cuddled his head against Madeleine's neck and spoke up, quite amazed by his sister's question:

"What is she? Why, she's Nêne!"

And, that evening, they huddled close to each other and didn't say another word.

CHAPTER XVII

EVERYTHING was ready. There was nothing more to do, nothing more to say. It was useless to weep, to pray, to struggle . . . all that was left for her was to go.

Only one more night—scarcely seven or eight hours——

The wedding was set for Wednesday, but on Monday Violette's mother was to come with part of her household goods. Madeleine didn't want to be there to make welcome this woman who came in triumph.

For the last time she had undressed the children, forcing herself to play with them the while as usual, so they wouldn't feel badly. And she had put them both in her own bed. For the last time she had surrendered her head to Jo, who had pulled her ears and rumpled her hair—as so often before.

Now Jo and Lalie were asleep. In the men's room the new farm-hand had stopped moving about. The house was dark, yet outside, the twilight was lingering on and on.

Madeleine sat down by the open window. On a chair by her side lay a little bundle of clothes, all that remained of her own at the Moulinettes, for

her other belongings had already gone. Michael had paid her off that morning.

It was the end.

She did not weep, she did not stir; her hair fell into her face; her legs and arms were numb; all her life was concentrated in her breast where her heart was beating furiously.

From the garden the border pinks sent in a sweet fragrance; a nightingale's song filled the room; then the tree-frogs began to make themselves heard from the direction of the pond, and presently their countless voices were heard all around.

Madeleine forced herself to drown the ache of her heart in a mumble of words:

"Now I shan't live in this cosy spot any more; I'd grown used to it and it hurts to go. I'll be lonesome for this nice old house, for the pond, for the stream where I did my washing. Where shall I find a garden that suits me so well? I shall never see the lilac bush again, nor the climbing roses in the front yard——"

She tried to lose her heartache along these little byways of thought. Poor girl!—better stick to the main road! The sleeping tots whose gentle breathing you can hardly hear, hold all your heart in bonds.

"I was the mistress here. Everything in the house went as I said;—it won't be the same elsewhere!"

As if your heart cared about that!

"I'll be ordered about roughly; they'll make me work in the fields with the men."

Why do you try to fool your heart? If you were asked, you wouldn't mind doing the work of a farm-hand all the year round;—you'd plough and sow and harvest, fetch and carry, no matter how heavy the load!

"Good evening, Madeleine!"

She looked up. A man whom she had not heard come in was standing in the yard.

"Good evening," she said.

He drew nearer. "Don't you recognise me? Does the uniform make such a difference?"

She started as if waking out of a sleep.

"Gideon!"

"Yes, it's me. I've had a furlough. I'm on my way now to catch a train back, at Château-Blanc. I didn't have much time this trip, or else I'd have paid you a real long visit."

"I'd have been very glad," said Madeleine. "Come in."

But he stepped to the window and leaned his arms on the sill.

"I can't stop. I haven't got time. Is the boss at home?"

"He hasn't returned yet," and she added, with a touch of scorn:

"This is a great day for him; he got himself bap-

tised at Chantepie. It's a triumph for the Catholics. —But you've probably heard all about it."

"Yes, it's being talked about around the neighbourhood. The wedding is set for this week?"

"Wednesday."

"And so you're leaving the Moulinettes? When are you going?"

"To-morrow."

Madeleine turned her head away. The gentle breathing of the children came faintly through the silence that had fallen between them. Gideon ventured in a low voice:

"It hurts, poor Madeleine—I know——"

She answered:

"It does." Her voice was the voice of a dying woman.

He said nothing more, not knowing how to express the things that were in his heart. For a little while he stayed on, leaning close beside her; then he took her hand and straightened up.

"Are you going already?" she asked.

"I've got to. The train is due at Château-Blanc at a quarter past ten. I wish you good health and good courage, Madeleine. You know I'm fond of you. I'd like to see you happy. We've spent four years working side by side—a person can't forget that. Besides, there's what you know, between Tiennette and me.—Madeleine, I'm sorry for you with all my heart.—I wish I could comfort you.

Try to cry, Madeleine—it would do you good.”

He kept her hand, saying awkwardly, endlessly: “Madeleine,—you know, poor Madeleine—my dear old Madeleine——” until she herself became uneasy:

“Aren’t you forgetting the time, Gideon?”

He paused, a little embarrassed; then he took off his dragoon’s helmet and said:

“Madeleine, I’d like to kiss you good-bye, if you’ll let me.”

She rose and offered him her cheek.

“Good-bye, dear boy.”

He walked off a few steps, stopped and turned around:

“I was going to forget: thank you, Madeleine, for the kind letter you wrote me—it did me a lot of good.”

Madeleine’s mind was far away, but she inquired:

“Have you seen Tiennette?”

“Yes, that’s what I came here for.—There’s somebody else I wanted to meet too, a wicked red wolf whose teeth I’d have liked to bash in.—It couldn’t be managed, and he can thank his stars!”

“Whom do you mean?”

“Boiseriot. I saw him all right, but I couldn’t get him alone! Only a while ago I saw him at a table at the inn, at Saint-Ambroise, with your brother.”

“With my brother!”

“Yes—it was a surprise to me!—They sat alone

in a corner together, drinking brandy. I sat down and waited for Boiseriot to go out alone, but he didn't. I could see them very well; Boiseriot acted as if he was drunk, but he was just pretending, because I saw him empty his glass under the table. As for Trooper, he was as drunk as a lord—I heard him shout: 'You say at ten o'clock at the Bellefontaine crossroads? All right!'—And he cussed and banged the table and rolled eyes as big as saucers. He must have swallowed an awful lot of brandy to get himself in such a state."

Madeleine said half to herself:

"When he's drunk he's like crazy."

The clock in the house struck the hour.

"Nine o'clock!" said Gideon. "I'll have to hurry.—Good-bye, Madeleine!"

And he vanished in the deepening shadows of the night.

Madeleine had not risen to see him off, nor waved good-bye, nor moved at all: she was so tired, so weary and worn-out.

She was fond of her good young comrade, but she was feeling so utterly miserable just now! She was feeling so miserable that Gideon and Tiennette and Trooper and all the rest were almost indifferent to her.

Her mind was not very clear. What was it Gideon had said? Trooper was drunk;—Boiseriot made him drink brandy. Why? "At ten o'clock

at the Bellefontaine crossroads——” It was probably some sort of wager, some prank that would furnish the gossips with something new to talk about. Poor brother! He too chafed under his sorrow; his weak character did not stand up against adversity. He was getting drunk very often now; only the other day—when was it?—his eyes had been ugly——

“Oh, my God!”

Madeleine jumped to her feet, but her legs bent under her and she fell back into her chair. One memory among the many had come to the fore, cut its way through like a pointed blade of steel. She saw again that big threatening hand upraised:

“If I meet that man—God pity him!” She understood now!

For a moment she remained aghast. She did not hear the words that came brokenly from her lips:

“The wicked red wolf—ten o’clock—at Bellefontaine—that’s on Michael’s way—on Michael’s way.”

She sprang up, rushed out of the house, calling: “Gideon! Gideon!”

But her voice was choked and didn’t carry. She ran across the garden and out along the road to Château-Blanc.

“Gideon! Gideon! Help!”

No answer came. She wrung her hands.

"It's my fault!—It's my fault!—I prayed for it!—Damnation!"

Like one demented she ran across fields toward Bellefontaine. The footpaths were no longer visible in the darkness; she lost her way in a wide meadow and couldn't find the stile; she ran against a bushy hedge, broke through between two thorny shrubs with a great thrust of all her body and rolled on the other side into a deep ditch.

Her heart failed her; she had to stay sitting in the ditch for a moment. A night bird flew by, uttering its cry. With a great effort she got up; her hands, raised high, tore at each other. The cry of the owl had given birth to a thought and against the monstrosity of it she struggled with appalled desperation.

"No! no!—Not at that price!—I don't want them to be orphans!—I never wanted that!—I am cursed! I am cursed!"

She ran on, gasping for breath.

"I'm cursed if I don't get there in time!"

Above the hedges she saw a great black mass: it was the Bellefontaine woods, and the road ran along its edge. Three more fields to cross,—one more.—She reached the woods; her feet stumbled no more now, but went on as in a dream. There are two ancient oak trees that twine their branches over the crossroads. She ran straight to them and her hands

fell heavily on the shoulders of a man who was crouching there between the twin tree trunks.

"John, what are you doing here?"

The man straightened up and stepped back:

"Madeleine!"

"Yes, me!—Come away, this instant!"

Her voice rang harsh and cutting,—commandingly. His answer was a wild, terrible, insane burst of laughter.

"John, do you hear me?—Walk ahead of me!"

"You mind your own business! Go on home and to bed! Honest girls don't run about on the public roads at night."

Slowly, heavily he pushed her back,—back through the trees, back into a wide field where the night seemed less black. Madeleine clung to her brother's arm.

"Come, John, come away with me!"

But he shook her off with a last push and raised his arm threateningly.

"Clear out!"

"John, why are you here?"

"To deal death!—Get out!"

Madeleine came back close, darted at his raised arm which held a weapon aloft.

"What have you in your hand? Give it to me! Do you hear?"

She climbed against him, pulled down his wrist

and seized the weapon—a roadmender's hammer with a long holly handle.

She struggled and wheedled, she commanded and pleaded, she shamed him and flattered him.

"Give it to me, John! You've been drinking, you don't know what you're doing! Boiseriot made you drunk—the fiend!—I've come to fetch you, to lead you by the hand.—You must come with me, you must believe me!—Here! give me that thing at once! What do you want with it? John, think of waylaying anybody like this!—You're mad—and you're a coward!—Do you hear me?—If you have a grievance against someone, have it out with him in the open!—You're a coward, a beastly coward!"

"There's no cowardice about it—it's got nothing to do with it. I'm out to kill—first him, then myself!"

"Give me that thing, come on, give it to me!—Won't you? Of course you will!"

Crack! Suddenly, slyly, Madeleine had broken the flexible handle. She grabbed the hammer-head and hurled it away as far as she could.

"Now, will you come with me?"

Again that insane laughter rumbled from his throat.

"I'm out to kill!—I have my knife and, besides, I don't need any weapon, not even a stick!—I open my hand and I close it.—Death, that's what I'm here for! You get out!"

"John, you'll be eternally damned—and I too, I too!—You don't know!—Those two poor children—sleeping so quietly over there—come and see them! What have they done to you, the poor little innocents?"

"Death, that's what I want!—There's nothing to say. Get out of my way!"

Madeleine clung to him, held him tight with both her arms for a last appeal—and lied desperately:

"Listen, I won't let you—I love him! Yes, I love him!—I didn't want to tell you at first—I was too ashamed. Now you know!—I won't have you hurt him! It would kill me, I tell you!—You won't hurt him, will you?—John, my own big brother!—Come! let's go away—yes, yes, let's go! Listen, I'll prevent the marriage; I can, still! You see that it's best for you to mind me!—I say you'll not touch him! I'll defend him! I'll scream as soon as he comes in sight;—and shame will be on us—on you, on me, on all the family!"

Roughly he freed himself with a shake of his powerful shoulders.

"Get out of my way!" He thrust her away and made for the trees.

"You think so? You wait!"

Madeleine leaped forward; with arms spread wide she threw herself on her brother, lifted him off his feet and carried him off. With a twist of his back he escaped from her grasp and touched the ground

again; and his big hand came down on her. Madeleine felt her arms go weak; an irresistible force hurled her far away and her head rang against a tree trunk.

She found herself flat on her back; the field whirled around and around her; the ground heaved and fell; above, the stars were dancing; then nothingness.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw a big head bent over her and under her shoulders she felt a shaking arm. Trooper was kneeling beside her, completely sobered,—sobbing and pleading with infinite gentleness.

“Madeleine, wake up!—Sister, forgive me!—Madeleine, tell me you’re not hurt—that I didn’t do you harm!—”

Madeleine looked at him, bewildered. Suddenly memory returned. She uttered a cry and with hands still weak gripped her brother’s shoulders. He leaned down closer and said in a very low, shamed voice:

“Don’t be afraid: he’s gone past; by now he must be at the Moulinettes.—As for me, my madness is over.—Madeleine, what did I do to you? Tell me there’s no limb broken——”

Madeleine, raising herself painfully, had the courage to smile.

“No, nothing’s broken. I had a sudden weakness, that’s all.—Help me to get up, will you?”

When she was up, she had to go on leaning on him; so he said:

"Would you like me to carry you?"

She didn't answer; she was thinking.

"John," she said at last, "when you were a little fellow, I used to lead you along the roads.—I wasn't much bigger than you, but I knew the short-cuts better.—To-day you're losing your way, John, and once more I have to put you on the right road."

He replied in the gentle voice of his hours of distress:

"Lead me, sister."

"John, you must go away from these parts for a time; you must leave—right away—this very night! Walk all through the night and if you're not far enough away by morning, keep on walking through the day.—You said you'd find work easily in town:—go to town then. Here's some money for the first days of waiting;—here, take it!—When you're over this trouble and feeling all right again, you can come back. John, don't you think that's the best thing to do?"

"Lead me, sister."

She took him by the hand and together they came down through the woods. When they reached the road, they kissed each other. Then she said:

"Go now, dear."

And slowly he walked away.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was nearly midnight when Madeleine returned to the Moulinettes. The door was ajar, as she had left it, for Michael had gone in by the back way as he always did. She went in on tiptoe and, quick, quick, without a stop for breath, she undressed and dropped into bed.

The two children had slipped into the depression in the middle; she separated them and lay down between them and, slipping her arms under their soft little bodies, she lay quite still, eyes staring—crucified.

Her head buzzed; not a thought, not a memory there; nothing but the stupor of a poor animal that has been struck down.

A great weight lay on her chest, suffocating her. She drew her arms free and sat up; the children stirred; with infinite precautions she drew them close to her again and laid their heads in her lap.

The clock struck one. Madeleine had the sensation of a cold wind striking her forehead; her hair rose on her head. She could not weep, nor could she breathe. Her head went back and through her open lips passed a hoarse, heart-rending moan.

In the men's room across the hall, Michael had just waked up and, hearing her, called out:

"Madeleine—Madeleine, are you ill?"

There came no answer. He listened a little longer and, hearing no more, dropped off to sleep again.

She had thrown herself forward and bitten deep into the blankets.

The children were uncomfortable and now began to be restless. She had to straighten up again.

The moans sounded afresh. "My little babies!"

She drew them closer and closer, gathered them up against her, brought near their arms, crooked their little legs. Her hands would not stop fondling them, gliding over them slowly in an endless caress.

The night rolled by; the window-panes began to whiten; a cock, at the far end of the yard, saluted the day with his cruel crow.

"My babies!—Good-bye, my babies!"

She began to shake so hard that she was afraid it would wake them. For a minute she managed to control herself; she folded them to her more closely still, drew up her knees, bent down her head, and her hands spread over as much of them as they could cover.

"Good-bye! . . ."

She laid the two little heads back on the bolster, put her feet on the floor and, dragging herself up by the blankets, she raised herself out of bed at last.

She lighted a candle and came back to the bed to put on her clothes hastily. A horribly painful shiver passed over all her cold body; her teeth chattered.

Her hands kept on busily, fastening her skirt, buttoning her bodice; but her wide, staring eyes never moved. It was with her look now that she touched the two brown little heads, fondled them, sank herself into them.

All at once she blew out the candle. She made three steps away, then ran back and fell across the bed with arms spread wide.

And once more the dreadful moans arose.

She touched them again, she pressed her lips on the warm baby flesh, anywhere, everywhere, just as it happened.

At last she stiffened and drew back; but the little boy had half waked up and threw his arms around her neck, clutching a strand of her hair with his hand. Madeleine pressed to her cheek the closed little fist and, with one jerk, she pulled her hair out by the roots.

Then she ran to the door and fled, with her apron stuffed into her mouth.

CHAPTER XIX

EARLY one morning two sad women were going about the household tasks in a low thatched cottage. One of them was preparing the breakfast soup, the other, her daughter, was folding up and packing her work clothes.

"Now I'll say good-bye, mother."

"Aren't you going to eat something? You've got a long walk ahead, remember!—Have some soup, anyhow!"

"Thank you, I don't want anything."

"Aren't you feeling well?"

She shook her head by way of answer and her lips quivered.

"You must be ill, Madeleine!"

"I'd rather be ill. . . . I'd rather be dead!"

The mother crossed herself, then lifted toward her daughter her bony hands with the stiff joints—stiff from being so much in the suds.

"Madeleine, I don't like the way you talk. We mustn't invite trouble, but we must take it as it comes. Have a good cry—that'll relieve you. For all of two weeks now you've let this thing gnaw at you like a bad fever; is it sensible to work yourself into a falling sickness just because you're going to

a new place? Only thirty, and handsome and big and strong as you are? If your sisters could only see you, what would they say?"

Slowly she passed her crinkled fingers over the full shoulders and the ample arms.

"Come, now, drink your coffee, I've put a drop of brandy in it.—There now! Off you go; do your work and do it so your new masters will be pleased with you."

Madeleine took her bundle and went on her way.

A little down the road she halted. The heat of the sun was beginning to make itself felt; she found that her ill-adjusted bundle was too big, too round and awkward. So she sat down to repack it; but as she unfolded a warm, plushy garment, her heartache revived bitterly.

It was this jacket she used to wrap around Jo's cold little feet, over there, at the farm of Michael Corbier, who was no longer in need of a hired girl any more. And here was the half-burned apron with which she had thrown herself on Lalie, that awful day.

Memories were crowding each other within her.

She saw herself again coming to the home of the young widower who had lost his grip on life. She had loved him with a love that was sad and gentle and quite without hope. . . . But very soon the children had taken the first place in her heart; for a long time now they had held sovereign sway in it.

They had given her so much happiness and they had caused her so much anxiety.

She remembered their Sunday walks, their games by the pond. . . . She remembered the troubled hours, the anguished watches by Lalie's bed. That last memory was to her like a savage tear in her flesh; she would never cease hearing those plaintive cries:

"Nêne! It hurts, Nêne!"

Lord knew they had captured her heart: Jo with his square little paws that refused to be kept clean; Lalie with her pitiful, martyred little fingers.

Two weeks had gone by since she had left the children, since she had untied from about her neck the little arms that had entwined it in the abandon of sleep. She could hear their astonished cry that first morning after she was gone:

"Nêne! Nêne! Where are you, Nêne?"

Now she had hired herself out down valley, at the farm of—she couldn't even remember the name!

She got up again and as her grief was too plainly marked on her face she left the main road and took a side-path—a path that happened to pass by the Moulinettes.

Her heart bounded in her breast and her legs felt very tired.

As she came to a stile, a ploughman called:

"Hello, Madeleine!"

She raised her head. It was Corbier. He looked happy and friendly.

"Good morning," she replied. "I see you're at the ploughing."

"Yes, ploughing for feed corn. I've got a new plough—the old one is too heavy for this. I bought a real beauty—come and see!"

He was too absorbed in his latest pride to notice the poor, straining face. She asked:

"Are the children well?"

"As well as can be, thank you.—At first they kept asking for you, but now everything goes on oiled wheels. Violette has brought them around to her."

She turned her face away. Only then did he notice how disturbed she was and he said good-naturedly:

"You know, Madeleine, you've given us, all through four years, your best work and your best affection. Whenever you feel like dropping in at the Moulinettes, we'll count it a pleasure.—And I hope you may live in happiness and health, Madeleine."

"I wish you the same.—Thank you, Corbier."

And she went on her way, sobbing.

Yes, she'd go back to the Moulinettes—right away—as long as she had come so near. "At first they kept asking for you, but Violette has brought them around to her." Just like that, in a fortnight! It was enough to make anyone laugh!—Brought

them around to her? But how? With candy, perhaps.—That would be the only way she'd think of, the wicked thing! She couldn't possibly win them with affection because she had no heart—as Madeleine knew well enough.

She'd brought them around to her! Indeed!—That did make her laugh! Well, they'd see! . . . Thinking ahead, she bent her neck as if she felt already the little arms around it. The darlings! . . . No, never would they forget her! Wasn't she their true mother? Do children forget their mother in a fortnight?

She took the turn of the village road almost on the run and came up to the house. The door stood open; she went in.

"Good morning, Violette!"

"Good morning. What do you want? Did you forget something?"

"No—I was just passing.—I met Corbier and he asked me to drop in."

Violette drew herself up in her victorious hatred:

"You don't say!"

"Yes . . . whenever I'd like to . . . if it doesn't inconvenience you, Violette. . . ."

"Unfortunately it would inconvenience me. If I'm mistress here, it isn't your fault, is it? Your place is not in my house, no more than in the fields where my man is working."

"Oh, Violette! Don't be so wicked! Just this once—I'd like to see the children!"

Violette smiled cruelly.

"Very well! But you're going to be disappointed.—Here is Lalie now."

The little girl came in from the hall.

Madeleine took her in her arms, lifted her high up, covered her with kisses, again and again and again, on the eyes, on the forehead, on the scarred cheek, on the poor little deformed fingers. "You bring them around? Why, this is the way to win them."

The child let Madeleine fondle her but gave no response.

"Have you still got your little necklace, darling?"

"Mamma gave me a gold one, much prettier than yours!"

"Don't you love me any more, Lalie?"

The child hesitated.

"Yes, Madeleine."

"Say, Nêne!"

"Oh, I can say Madeleine now."

Her heart was buzzing like a disturbed hive. Violette kept on smiling and showed her sharp teeth.

"Where is Jo?"

"In his bed in the other room—you know the way."

Madeleine flew to him.

"Jo! my little Jo!"

Madeleine spread her big hands over the naked little body.

But the child did not stretch out his arms as he used to do. On the contrary: he squirmed and struck at her.

"I'm not Jojo any more! I'm a big man now!"

"My baby!"

"I don't like you! Go away! You aren't nice! You've got a smell like cheese."

With a deep sob that shook her whole being, Madeleine fled.

At the end of the garden she stumbled against the gate, but on she ran; she dropped her bundle, she dropped her wooden shoes, but she kept on running—straight to the pond, to a spot where the water was black and deep; running—running—running——

She came up to the surface at once, her lungs full of water. A thousand ripples splashed against her face—a thousand little voices sang in her ears mockingly:

"Nêne! Nêne! Nêne!"

Consciousness went—and she slipped down to the muddy bed.

Then a few bubbles came up—and once more the water was calm.

Lazy clouds moved in the sky like a flock of white sheep. The sun stood high. It was a peaceful, glorious morning.



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